

*THE WALLS BETWEEN US:
A CASE STUDY ON WOMEN OF THE WALL*

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INTRODUCTION

“Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.”
- Robert Frost

Women of the Wall (WOW) is a prayer group whose central mission is to achieve “the social and legal recognition of the right, as women, to wear prayer shawls, pray out loud and read from the Torah collectively at the women’s section of the Western Wall” in Jerusalem.¹ Since 1988, Women of the Wall has been a topic of great controversy among Jews representing nearly every denomination and demographic because of its endeavor to pray as a multi-denominational prayer group at the Ultra-Orthodox-led Western Wall. A deeper look at the diverse perspectives on Women of the Wall can enable one to further understand the complexities that this multi-denominational prayer group embodies. Far from black and white, this research will delve into the sociological relations that have played out on both Israeli and American soil. These relations include: 1) women in the religious, public sphere; 2) Israeli-American relations; and 3) the clash of religion and state in Israel. This thesis will also consider the possibility of religious pluralism—the breaking down of walls between Jewish denominations and the recognition that there is more than one way to be Jewish—in Israel.

To date, the only published work on the history of WOW is Phyllis Chesler and

¹ Women of the Wall registered as an official non-governmental organization on June 25, 1998: Registration paper “תעודה לרישומה של עמותה” in author’s possession. Women of the Wall, “Mission,” 2016, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/mission/> (accessed May 2, 2017). Email correspondence with Lesley Sachs, March 23, 2017. It should be noted that the mission statement written when WOW registered as a non-governmental organization specifies the women’s section of the Western Wall as part of the prayer group’s goal. As of 2016, Women of the Wall is willing to accept a new proposed plan in the southern section of the Western Wall and has changed its mission statement on its website. Still, WOW has not changed the registered mission statement in order to give the prayer group leverage in negotiations to remain in the women’s section.

Rivka Haut's book, *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*.

This book is a compilation of personal narratives provided by those who contributed in one way or another to WOW's early years.² Chesler and Haut assembled testimonies from rabbis, founding WOW participants, and early WOW supporters. Although the Chesler and Haut volume provides historians with valuable primary source material, this work is not a critical history of WOW. Additionally, since the book was published in 2002, the importance of reconstructing the history of this organization over the last fifteen years becomes all the more significant.

This thesis will not only provide an overview of Women of the Wall's history, but it will also provide readers with an analysis of how this organization has changed over time, highlighting the critical turning points. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how Women of the Wall's history reflects larger issues of Israeli society. Lastly, this thesis will draw conclusions from primary source findings and offer prospects for Women of the Wall's success.

Currently, Women of the Wall is part of a coalition of both American and Israeli liberal Jewish movements with the goal of creating a pluralistic and egalitarian prayer section at the southern end of the Western Wall. The formation of this coalition came as a result of negotiations first advised by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in April 2013 and led by Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky. Nevertheless, although the Israeli Supreme Court voted in support of the construction of a third section, Prime Minister Netanyahu has refrained from implementing the plan as of January 2017.

² Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut, *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003).

This plan is considered a compromise with the men and women's prayer plazas under the auspices of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, conducted by the ultra-Orthodox leader Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the new prayer plaza to be governed by WOW and progressive Jewish leaders. Under the new plan, the Western Wall will still remain a religious holy site governed by religious institutions instead of being conducted as a national holy site. However, the implementation of the plan would grant authority to religious institutions other than just the ultra-Orthodox and would signify national recognition of liberal Jewry in Israel.

Through Women of the Wall's influence on women in the public sphere, its use of media as a tool for social change, and its social values of feminism and Jewish religious pluralism, WOW is strengthening democracy in Israeli society. This argument will be explored through four chapters. The first chapter will explain three main effects WOW has had in the religious public sphere in Israeli society: 1) It has been a source of consciousness-raising for women's religious equality; 2) It has been a source of Jewish women's empowerment; and 3) It has helped maintain a space for Jewish women to exercise their religious rights in the public sphere. The second chapter will discuss how media has been used as a tool for social advocacy through two turning points in Women of the Wall's history. In Israel, media has put WOW on the public agenda, while in America it has served as a means for greater investment and active support for the prayer group. The third chapter will call into question the degree of Jewish religious pluralism that is possible in Israel and consider how the very nature of a multi-denominational prayer group is reinforcing democracy in Israeli society. WOW is bringing the issues of gender equality and religious equality to the forefront of Israeli society, revealing the

problems of a theocracy governed by a solitary denominational establishment. The fourth chapter presents the plan for the creation of a pluralistic third section at the Western Wall. Aside from offering WOW's perspective, this chapter will also present various perspectives on the compromise proposal including the viewpoints of the prayer group that calls itself "Original-Women of the Wall," Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the Masorti Movement for Conservative Judaism in Israel. This chapter will also explain the symbolic and political implications that the Western Wall compromise could have on Israeli society and world Jewry. The recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism would signify Israel's acknowledgment that there is more than one way to be Jewish and such a development could be the impetus for further Jewish pluralism and equality in Israel.

Methodology

This history of Women of the Wall is based on both primary and secondary sources. Twenty interviews were conducted over three months (from July to September 2016) with subjects chosen by purposeful sampling. Interviews were conducted with those who play or have played an integral role in the development of Women of the Wall. This sampling also included individuals who provided a viewpoint on Women of the Wall related to a specific Jewish denomination, Israeli or American physical demographic, and Israeli or American nationality. Additionally, vocal opponents of the organizations were included to paint a more comprehensive picture of the Women of the Wall controversy.

Questionnaires were developed to serve as an outline for conducting the interviews. The majority of interviews were conducted via Skype or phone with one done in person.

Interview questions as well as the thesis proposal and research consent forms were translated into modern Hebrew, and those who could not participate in an English interview were asked to type their answers in Hebrew and email their responses. A native Hebrew speaker translated these Hebrew interviews into English. Typed transcripts exist for all interviews and provide the basis for this thesis, which offers a variety of perspectives on Women of the Wall's enduring narrative. These interview transcripts will be deposited at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives located on the campus of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. In addition to the data harvested from oral interviews, supplementary information was gathered from Women of the Wall's own documents including press releases and court case records.

Some of the key interviewees for this research include Anat Hoffman, Lesley Sachs, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Yizhar Hess, and Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz. Anat Hoffman is the Chairwoman of Women of the Wall's board. She is also the Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), the legal and advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel. Hoffman is a well-known social activist, who served as a Jerusalem city councilor for fourteen years, fighting for the rights of minority groups.³ As she responded in her interview, she is “fascinated by what happens to minorities, because [she] believes that the Jewish state is measured by how it deals with its weakest people in society—how we deal with our prisoners, how we deal with our minorities, with our special needs people, the disenfranchised—that really defines who we are.”⁴ Hoffman

³ Women of the Wall, “Board and Staff,” <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/full-history/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁴ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 1.

feels that both women and liberal Jews are among those treated as minorities in Israeli society, and it is these groups, in particular, that have motivated her social advocacy work.⁵

Lesley Sachs is the Director of Women of the Wall. She was born in South Africa and moved to Haifa, Israel when her parents made *aliyah* when she was five years old.⁶ Sachs is the 2014 recipient of the National Council of Jewish Women Jewel Bellush Outstanding Israeli Feminist award. She was one of the founding members of Isha L'isha, Haifa's Feminist Center, and worked for ten years with the Israel Women's Network striving for social equality. Sachs also served as the Executive Director of the IRAC and the Vice President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). She was on the board of directors for the Jewish National Fund-Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael and is currently the chair of Michmanim—The Pre-Army Mechina Program in Jaffa.⁷ She brings extensive experience in running NGOs (non-governmental/non-profit organizations) to her position with Women of the Wall.⁸

Rabbi Rick Jacobs is the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish denomination in North America. Rabbi Jacobs is part of a coalition organized by Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky to find a resolution to women's equality at the Western Wall. The coalition includes Women of the Wall, the Federations of North America, and Jewish leaders from both the American and Israeli Jewish denominational

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 1.

⁷ Women of the Wall, "Board and Staff," <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/full-history/> (accessed March 15, 2017)

⁸ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 2.

movements in Israel.⁹ Having studied for two decades at Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute where he is now a senior rabbinic fellow, he is committed to paving the way for greater Jewish pluralism in Israel. He has also held numerous leadership positions with the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.¹⁰

Yizhar Hess is the Executive Director of The Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel. He is a licensed lawyer from the Israel Bar Association and “represents the Masorti-Conservative Movement in the negotiations with the Israeli government regarding egalitarian prayer at the Kotel.”¹¹ He is a supporter of Jewish pluralism and a part of the coalition attempting to find a solution to women's prayer at the Kotel. Hess regularly joins Women of the Wall for Rosh Chodesh services and feels that it is “a spiritual experience to be there to daven with [Women of the Wall] in a way that enables [him] to express Jewish activism” in addition to prayer being something that speaks to him in general.¹²

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz is a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) rabbi currently serving as the Rabbi of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which oversees the Kotel. Born in Jerusalem, he studied at the Yeshiva “Kol Torah” and was ordained by the halakhic (Jewish legal) authority of the generation, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Urbach. Rabbi Rabinowitz served in the religious troops of the Israel Defense Forces and later obtained a position as Community Rabbi in Jerusalem. From 1994–1995, he served as the Rabbi of

⁹ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁰ URJ, “Rabbi Rick Jacobs,” <https://www.urj.org/rabbi-rick-jacobs> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹¹ New Israel Fund, “Yizhar Hess, Executive Director of the Masorti Movement in Israel, in conversation,” <http://www.newisraelfund.org.uk/yizhar-hess/> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹² Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 2.

the Holy Sites in Israel. Rabbi Rabinowitz is a vocal opponent of Women of the Wall.¹³

Disclaimer

This research recognizes the danger in categorizing people and does not seek to discriminate against any denomination or group. It understands that individuals cannot be solely defined by their religious denominations or identifications but should be defined by their individual actions. It also understands that within each religious denomination, there exists a spectrum of adherence to religious tradition.

¹³ Written interview with Shmuel Rabinowitz, September 18, 2016, p. 1. Translated by Rabbi Ofer Beit-Halachmi.

COMPREHENSIVE CHRONOLOGY

Setting the Scene: Why the Western Wall?

The Western Wall in Jerusalem, known in Hebrew as the Kotel, is a site which connects Jews of all types to their past. It is a remnant of one of four support walls that surrounded the Second Temple before its destruction in 70 CE. Because the Western Wall was the closest to the Temple's Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the Temple, it has become a place of prayer for Jews around the world. This site has also been called the "Wailing Wall" as it has served as a place of assembly for Jews to lament the loss of the Temple.

Both men and women actually prayed together at the Western Wall until 1948, when Jordanian forces conquered the Old City of Jerusalem in the War of Independence.¹⁴ Under Jordanian control, Israelis were forbidden to pray at the Western Wall. However, the Old City was recaptured by Israel in 1967 in the Six-Day War. Men and women once again prayed together, but this would quickly end as this historic national site began its transformation into a religious site. Following the war, the Arab Maghreb (North African) Quarter was destroyed in order to create a larger public plaza for the many Jews expected to visit the site.¹⁵ Then, on June 27, 1967, the Knesset, Israel's legislative body, passed the *Protection of Holy Places Law, 1967*.¹⁶ This law "authorize[d] the Chief Rabbis of Israel to set the rules and regulations of the Kotel."¹⁷ Rabbi Shlomo Goren, then Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Defense Forces, granted oversight of the Western Wall to Rabbi Yehuda Getz, an Orthodox rabbi who served as the Chief

¹⁴ Yuval Elizur and Lawrence Malkin, *The War Within: Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Threat to Democracy and the Nation* (London: The Overlook Press, 2013).

¹⁵ The Jewish Agency for Israel and Makom, "Timeline of the Kotel," <http://makomisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Timeline-of-the-Kotel-A5.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁶ Read the *Protection of Holy Places Law 5727 (1967)* at <https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/HolyPlaces.htm> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁷ Ibid.

Rabbi of Jewish holy sites.¹⁸ On July 19, 1967, the Ministry of Religion erected a mechitzah (divider), creating unequal prayer sections at the Kotel with the men's section four times larger than the women's section.¹⁹ As of May 2017, this arrangement remains. Rabbi Getz governed the Western Wall until his death in 1995, with Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz succeeded him.

The election of the Likud Party (National Liberal Party) in 1977 and the ascension of Menachem Begin played a large part in granting power to the right-wing religious sector of Israel. The Orthodox parties formed a coalition with Likud, which was a new development in Israel's history. The religious minority had put an end to the continuous rule of secular governments.²⁰ At this time, "the Orthodox push to erode what little separation there existed between state and synagogue in Israeli society provoked a harsh backlash from the Reform and Conservative branches" of American Jewry.²¹ This new coalition held power that began to alter the religious character of Israeli society.

In December 1989, the Ministries of Religion and Justice ruled to "prohibit the conduct of a religious ceremony which is not according to the custom of the place and which injures the sensitivities of the worshipping public towards the place."²² This custom was not defined in writing, but authority was given to the Western Wall Heritage Foundation [WWHF], which governs the Western Wall and which enforces ultra-Orthodox practice as the "local custom." The WWHF is under the leadership of Rabbi

¹⁸ John Ankerberg and Jimmy DeYoung, *Israel Under Fire: The Prophetic Chain of Events That Threatens the Middle East* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 109.

¹⁹ The Jewish Agency for Israel and Makom, "Timeline of the Kotel."

²⁰ Elizur and Malkin, *The War Within*, p.31-34.

²¹ Danny Ben-Moshe and Zohar Segev, eds., *Israel, the Diaspora, and Jewish Identity* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 126.

²² Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter, and Leonard Hammer, eds., *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-Existence* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 32.

Rabinowitz, who serves as the Kotel administrator. With this shift in authority, the status of the Western Wall shifted as well—from being conducted as a national, holy site, to an ultra-Orthodox synagogue.

Since 1995, Rabbi Rabinowitz has enforced gender segregation with the *mechitza* (divider), “modest” dress rules and other restrictions according to the “local custom,” which he has defined as “ultra-Orthodoxy.” Since, in the eyes of the ultra-Orthodox, the tallit (prayer shawl) is seen as a “male garment,” women cannot pray with a prayer shawl. Also, since ultra-Orthodox Jewish custom does not allow men to hear a woman’s voice for fear that her voice will distract a man from his prayer or study, women are excluded from public spheres that involve raised voices and ultimately, are silenced. Unlike the men’s prayer section, the women’s section is only one-quarter of the Western Wall and does not permit the use of any Torah scrolls.

Although the Western Wall can be a place for Jews to connect to something larger than themselves—to their peoplehood, to the thousands who have been there before them and the thousands who will come after them—today it tests the strength of *Klal Yisrael*, the Jewish collective. It tests the viability of religious equality and religious pluralism in Israel. These tests are exemplified through the controversial events surrounding the prayer group Women of the Wall.



December 1, 1988: Women gather together to pray at the Western Wall with tallitot and prayer shawls. This photo would later represent Women of the Wall's first Torah service at the Kotel.

Source: Women of the Wall's educational materials.

Motivations to Pray at the Western Wall

With the many inequalities that exist at the Western Wall, some may question why non-ultra-Orthodox Jews would even choose to pray specifically at the site. One can identify four main motivations: religious-historical significance; national significance; spiritual significance; and symbolic significance. However, for some who live in Jerusalem and routinely pray at the Western Wall, the site has become simply another place of worship.

1) Religious-historical significance

Right now, the Kotel is the closest place that Jews can really pray at, the

closest place where the *Kodesh Kiddushin Beit HaMikdash* was at. Quite often on a Rosh Chodesh,²³ I'm sure there are other days, but on Rosh Chodesh particularly, during Hallel, I'll raise my eyes and look over the top of the wall and sort of have a feeling that I'm in the right place, the *makom kadosh*. –Cheryl Birkner Mack²⁴

Those who connect to the Western Wall because of its religious-historical significance find the site meaningful because of its physical location and its connection to the ancient Temple's Holy of Holies.

2) National significance

I wish the government would turn it into a site of national significance instead of insisting it had to be considered an ultra-Orthodox synagogue. I think if it were seen in the bigger picture of what it is, a site of national significance, it would be much healthier for Israel. That would mean a different Israel. –Rabbi Jackie Ellenson²⁵

Those who connect to the Western Wall because of **national** significance find the site meaningful because of its connection to Israel's attainment of independence. In the Israeli victory of the Six Day War in 1967, Israeli paratroopers captured the Western Wall from Jordan, turning it into a national site.

²³ *Rosh Chodesh*, meaning “head of the month” in Hebrew, is the term used to indicate the beginning of each new Jewish month. The Jewish calendar is determined by the lunar cycle.

²⁴ Transcript of interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 4.

²⁵ Transcript of interview with Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, July 27, 2016, p.8.

3) Spiritual significance:

“I feel a connection to my ancestors and my people there.” –Rachel Jeshurun-Cohen²⁶

Those who connect to the Western Wall because of its spiritual significance view the Western Wall as a place where they can sense something larger than themselves. This may be an experience of God or a more general experience of being in a holy place and connecting to one’s Jewish peoplehood. “Holiness,” what is known as “*kedusha*” in Hebrew, is defined in many different ways. One argument for what makes something “holy” is the prolonged use of something for religious practice.

4) Symbolic significance:

I think that it has a symbolic aspect in that, that symbolism can be and should be transferred to all other areas of equality in which there is exclusion of women from public spaces, whether it's buses or post offices or serving in the army or whatever it is. I think that our struggle is part of that bigger struggle. –Betsy Kallus²⁷

Those who connect to the Western Wall because of symbolic significance see the Western Wall as a symbol of something greater than the physical site itself. Many of these worshippers see the Western Wall as a site where societal issues can be played out in the public sphere. In light of Women of the Wall, the site has come to represent the struggle for gender equality and religious pluralism in Israel. There are some worshippers

²⁶ Transcript of interview with Rachel Cohen Yeshurun, July 23, 2016, p. 2.

²⁷ Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 3.

who pray with Women of the Wall viewing their prayer as activism, and by publicly displaying their conviction that there is more than one way to be Jewish in Israel.

Causes of Detachment from the Western Wall

On the other hand, there are many non-ultra-Orthodox Jews who choose not to pray at the Western Wall. Israeli Reform rabbi, Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, has posed five possible reasons for this opposition that have been expounded upon below.

1) Idolatry: Some feel that praying at the Western Wall is idolatry, as if one is praying to a wall of stones.²⁸ The physical site has been so revered, creating a fine line between visiting the site to worship God and visiting the site for the holiness that some feel is inherent within the wall itself.

2) Nationalism and Militarism: Some feel uncomfortable with the militaristic aspect of the Western Wall, as the religious site aids to promote Jewish and Israeli dominance. The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) explains that:

The Israeli Knesset passed laws to protect holy sites and ensure freedom of worship to all, and offered Israeli citizenship to Jerusalem's Arab residents, most of who declined. Since 1967, Jerusalem has become a focal point of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In 1980, Israel passed the *Basic Law: Jerusalem Capital*

²⁸ Written Interview with Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, September 18, 2016, p. 1.

of Israel, reaffirming the unified Jerusalem as its eternal, undivided capital.²⁹

To this day, Jerusalem remains a city of controversy because of the conflict surrounding it as a capital for the Jewish state as well as for an intended Palestinian state.

- 3) **Centrality of the Temple:** Some Jewish denominations, Reform Judaism being one of them, have “toned down the centrality of the Temple and the sacrifices in our tradition,” and therefore, feel disconnected from the site.³⁰
- 4) **Palestinian Neighborhood:** Before the Six Day War, the area of the Western Wall was home to a Palestinian neighborhood, which was bulldozed after the Israeli victory. This reality makes some Jews feel uncomfortable praying at the Western Wall today.³¹
- 5) **Proximity to Temple Mount:** The Temple Mount is a contentious site with ties to both Jews and Muslims. The site is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque but is also the ancient site of the Jewish Holy of Holies which was located in the once standing Temple. Today, oppositional forces continue the attempt to deny one another access to a site important to both religions, causing some to feel uncomfortable praying at

²⁹ Ricki Hollander, “BACKGROUND: History of Jerusalem,” *Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America*, http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_print=1&x_context=7&x_issue=4&x_article=1355 (accessed May 3, 2017).

³⁰ Written interview with Levi Weiman-Kelman, September 18, 2016, p. 1.

³¹ Ibid.

the surrounding Western Wall.³²



The Western Wall before 1967. Source: Women of the Wall's educational materials.

Comprehensive Chronology

A comprehensive chronology of Women of the Wall will provide a historical narrative of the prayer group's journey that is essential for understanding how it has evolved over the years and how it has challenged Israeli society to progress as well.

Lesley Sachs, Director of Women of the Wall, explains that Women of the Wall's years

³² Ricki Hollander, "Updated: The Battle over Jerusalem and the Temple Mount," *Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America*, December 29, 2016, http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=7&x_issue=4&x_article=1404#control (accessed May 3, 2017).

can best be explained with the division of its history into three eras. With the first indication of government approval for the creation of a pluralistic third prayer section at the Kotel in 2013, another era of Women of the Wall seems to be underway. Therefore, following is an overview of Women of the Wall's four main historical eras.

1) Era of the Supreme Court (1988–2000)

During this time, Women of the Wall attempted to gain rights to pray as a women's prayer group at the women's section of the Western Wall through the Supreme Court. They spent much time waiting for case verdicts and solutions from both the Mancal (Directors-General) and Ne'eman³³ Commissions appointed by the Israeli Supreme Court. In those years, the lack of media outlets greatly affected their portrayal: "Women of the Wall were portrayed as a group of crazy Americans and *reformim* (i.e., Reform Jews). We couldn't change the way Israeli society felt about us. We were marginalized. We were mocked. We did not receive any support at all."³⁴

December 1st, 1988

In 1988, a group of women³⁵ who were attending the American Jewish Congress's first International Conference on the Empowerment of Jewish Women in Jerusalem decided to gather together to pray at the Western Wall. The group of about seventy women set up their prayer space alongside the Western Wall stones with a folding table and a Torah scroll. As Anat Hoffman recounts:

³³ Named after the Justice Minister Yaakov Ne'eman.

³⁴ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 4.

³⁵ See Appendix C for the list of women present at the prayer service in 1988.

Only American tourists can be as innocent and loving in the face of the complex realities of Israel, they still romanticize everything they see, and that group really answered the bill. They really came with the loftiest of motives, to take a pocket in time, in that conference and thank God that there is a miracle of the State of Israel.³⁶

However, when the group opened up a Torah scroll their peaceful prayer service was soon met by yells, curses and physical assaults from ultra-Orthodox men and women. Still, the group of women was allowed to complete their service, and they walked out from the Kotel plaza in joyous song. Since that day, this spontaneous assembly of a multi-denominational, women's prayer minyan on a cold, December morning has grown into an international phenomenon known as Women of the Wall.³⁷

January-April 1989: Monthly Minyan

Following that first service, the local women decided to return to the Kotel on a regular basis to pray in a women's minyan. They experienced verbal and physical violence from both ultra-Orthodox men and women who did not approve of their way of *tefillah*. Some of the physical acts of violence the prayer group endured included being spat on, having chairs and benches thrown at them over the *mechitzah* (dividing wall) and even being grabbed and rammed into the Kotel wall.³⁸

³⁶ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 2.

³⁷ Women of the Wall registered as an official non-governmental organization on June 25, 1998: Registration paper "תעודה לרישומה של עמותה" in author's possession.

³⁸ Transcript of Skype interview with Shulamit Magnus, September 4, 2016 p.5.

March 1989: Formation of the International Committee for Women of the Wall (ICWOW)

As the group of women in Jerusalem continued to pray at the Western Wall, those who returned to America formed the International Committee for Women of the Wall (ICWOW) which helped to fundraise and support the prayer group from abroad. This group was made up of rabbis as well as other supporters that routinely held conference calls with Women of the Wall board members to offer support. One of ICWOW's most significant contributions to the efforts of the Women of the Wall was the donation of a Torah scroll.

May 1989: First Women of the Wall Supreme Court Hearing

Since the Kotel police refused to provide protection for the prayer group, the women filed their first petition to the Israeli Supreme Court, "asking for an order to allow women to pray together with Torah and tallit and to protect them from the continuing violence."³⁹ In May, Israel's Supreme Court heard Women of the Wall's case for the first time. The state was then given six months to form a response to the petition. In the meantime, Women of the Wall was barred by the Supreme Court from praying at the Kotel with a Torah and with tallitot. It was at this time that ultra-Orthodox opponents used the "*kol isha erva*" argument against Women of the Wall, demanding that this women's minyan should not pray aloud. This phrase, meaning "the voice of a woman is lewd," stems from the Talmud, and has been used to silence the women's prayer group.⁴⁰

³⁹ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, 362.

⁴⁰ Women of the Wall, "Full History," <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/full-history/> (accessed November 23, 2016). The rabbinical literature on the subject of "Kol Isha" is extensive. For a helpful digest of the

December 31, 1989: Declaration by the Ministries of Religion and Justice

In December 1989, the Ministries of Religion and Justice ruled to “prohibit any religious ceremony at a holy place that is not in accordance with the custom of the holy site and which offends the sensitivities of the worshipers at the place.”⁴¹ This custom was not defined in writing, but the governing authority for the Western Wall was given to the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which has overseen the holy site since 1988. A violation of this ruling would result in six months jail time and/or a fine. Rabbi Rabinowitz continues to enforce ultra-Orthodox practice as the “local custom” at the Western Wall.

January 1990–December 1993

During this time, Women of the Wall proceeded to hold services at the women’s section of the Kotel without a Torah scroll. Some months they experienced violence from ultra-Orthodox men and women, and some months they prayed in peace. They even held festival services for Purim, Tisha b’Av and Shavuot, chanting the seasonal liturgy.⁴²

January 1994–April 1996: The Mancal Commission⁴³

In response to an independent lawsuit filed in 1990 by the International Committee for Women of the Wall, the Israeli Supreme Court gathered rabbinic opinions on the role

subject, see Baruch D. Schreiber, “The Woman’s Voice in the Synagogue,” *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 7 (1984/5): 27–32.

⁴¹ Bagatz 257/89 *Anat Hoffman v. Western Wall Commissioner*, 48(2) PD 265. PDF in author’s possession.

⁴² Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, 40.

⁴³ In Hebrew, the word Mancal refers to an acronym (viz., *menahel klali*) which conveys the notion of a “CEO, a chief executive officer, general manager, president, director-general, etc.”

of women in relation to ritual performance and worship. However, the perspectives did not represent a variety of Jewish denominations. In the end, the Supreme Court requested that the government organize a commission to find a solution to women's prayer at the Western Wall: The Mancal Commission. For two and a half years, "the legal case continue[d] to meet with governmental stonewalling and delay."⁴⁴

On April 2, 1996, "the Mancal Commission finally issued its report, proposing that the Women of the Wall be moved to the southeastern corner of the Old City wall, a site outside the Old City itself in Arab East Jerusalem, where anyone already has the right to hold prayer services. The location is not a safe one for Jews."⁴⁵ Continuing the search for a solution, "on April 21, the government appointed a new ministerial commission to decide if and how to implement the Mancal Commission's report."⁴⁶

June 1997: Government Decision

"The government issued its report: 'Decision 14 of the Ministers' Committee on Jerusalem: Prayer Arrangements at the Western Wall Plaza in Relation to the High Court of Justice Case of *Women of the Wall*.' The report recommended maintenance of the status quo, under which women's group prayer at the Kotel was illegal."⁴⁷ This report was filed with the Supreme Court yielding a Supreme Court hearing for Women of the Wall on September 24, 1997.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, 364.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 370.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 375.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 376.

September 24, 1997– September 1998: The Ne’eman Commission⁴⁹

Persuaded by the Supreme Court judges, Women of the Wall along with the ICWOW agreed to another commission to find a solution to women’s prayer at the Kotel—the Ne’eman Commission. Up until this time, many locations were suggested, but none were suitable sites for prayer. Some locations were considered too dangerous for Jews and one site was even outside of the Old City.

The Ne’eman Commission had first been established in 1997 to address the issue of conversion and to answer the question of “Who is a Jew?” This commission responded to the query of “whether the Orthodox powers in Israel would recognize Reform and Conservative conversions from abroad.”⁵⁰ It recommended that in Israel, conversions be conducted solely under the Orthodox authorities, however, “the process of conversion...would be placed in the hands of a ‘tripartite body’ made up of rabbis representing the three main movements in Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.”⁵¹ This was a major victory for the non-Orthodox movements as “for the *first time*, the state of Israel and the Orthodox institutions of the state officially recognized the existence of the Reform and Conservative movements and recognized them to be a part of the religious life of international Jewry.”⁵² As women’s prayer at the Kotel similarly represented an issue relating to the religious rights of multiple denominations, the Ne’eman Commission was appointed.

⁴⁹ On June 27, 1997 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a committee to develop ideas and proposals regarding the issue of religious conversion in Israel. Ya’akov Ne’eman (1939–2017) was appointed to chair this commission. Ne’eman, an Israeli lawyer, served as Israel’s Minister of Justice (1996, 2009–2013) and Minister of Finance (1997–1998).

⁵⁰ Gregory S. Mahler, *Politics and Government in Israel: The Maturation of a Modern State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 85.

⁵¹ Ibid., 86.

⁵² Ibid.

In September of 1998, the Ne'eman Commission issued its report, concluding that “WOW should pray in the Robinson’s Arch area immediately south of the Kotel, currently an archeological site.” WOW had no vote and the prayer group’s proposal of a time-sharing arrangement⁵³ at the Kotel was not considered.⁵⁴

February 16, 1999

On this date, the state submitted an affidavit by Jerusalem Chief of Police Yair Yitzhaki, arguing that the members of WOW were responsible for provoking the violence at the Kotel. The Supreme Court then “held a hearing on the petition of WOW and ICWOW to pray as a group at the Western Wall, with Torah and tallit.”⁵⁵ No decision was made at that time.

January–May 2000: The Supreme Court versus the Knesset

In January of 2000, three judges toured the Kotel plaza and worked with representatives from WOW, the ICWOW, the Antiquities Authority and multiple councils overseeing holy sites to find a solution. Finally in May, the Supreme Court decided that women’s right to pray was legal, and awarded Women of the Wall money for their legal costs. However, despite recognition of rights, Supreme Court Justice Eliyhau Matza “transferred the matter to the government, ...charging it to find a solution at the Kotel within six months.”⁵⁶ As a result of this Supreme Court victory, the ultra-

⁵³ WOW had demanded one hour to pray in the women’s section on the first of every Jewish month, except for the month of Tishrei. See: <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/legal-history/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁵⁴ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, 384.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 389.

Orthodox Knesset parties reacted with new legislation on May 22. They tried to pass legislation banning women from holding ceremonies in the women's section of the Western Wall, including reading from the Torah and praying with tallitot and tefillin. The legal punishment was set to seven years imprisonment. The law passed through the first phase but then was cancelled. The Supreme Court gave the Knesset six months to find a solution.

2) Era of Prayer Group Maintenance (2001–2009)

According to Sachs, the second era was a stagnant period of time. Tired from the political battles, Women of the Wall was focused on maintaining monthly prayer group attendance. “Women of the Wall are worn down. They do *shacharit* and *Hallel* at the Kotel. They go to read from the Torah at Robinson's Arch.”⁵⁷ General attendance was low with just a little over a minyan each month. Sometimes a visiting group from America would join them. The group received support from Jewish groups in the United States but no support from Israeli society.

December 2001: Amendment to the Holy Site Law of 1967 is Passed

The “Protection of Holy Places Law” part of “The Basic Laws of Israel” strives to maintain freedom of access to religious sites and guard them from desecration.⁵⁸ In 2001, an Amendment to the Holy Site Law was passed. It reads:

1. The prayer area at the Western Wall plaza shall be divided into a men's

⁵⁷ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

⁵⁸ “Basic Laws of Israel: Protection of Holy Places Law,” 1967, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-protection-of-holy-places-law-1967> (accessed May 3, 2017).

section and women's section by a divider, and prayers by men and women in a mixed group shall not be permitted there. 2. No religious ceremony shall be held in the women's section near the Western Wall that includes taking out a Torah scroll and reading from it, blowing the *shofar*, or wearing *tallitot* or tefillin. 3. Violators shall be imprisoned for seven years.⁵⁹

June 2003: Court's Final Decision

The court's decision in 2003 appeared to be the final negotiation on finding a solution for Women of the Wall. It decided "to endorse the state's solution to accept 'Robinson's Arch' as a suitable alternative" to the women's section.⁶⁰ Since the verdict of 2003, at every Rosh Chodesh, Women of the Wall first pray *shacharit* at the women's section and then make their way to Robinson's Arch for the Torah service. In the Supreme Court's perspective, Robinson's Arch does not violate the Holy Site Law because Robinson's Arch is "next" to the Kotel and thus viewed as a separate site.

3) Era of Media Uprising and Support (2010–2015)

A third era in the history of Women of the Wall began with the arrest of Israeli activist and Women of the Wall Chairwoman, Anat Hoffman. As a result, Women of the Wall gained American and Israeli media attention. Women of the Wall also started to actively use media outlets to promote the prayer group's own story. Over time, this changed the way it was received by Israeli society and strengthened American support as

⁵⁹ Women of the Wall, "Full History," <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/full-history/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁶⁰ Women of the Wall, "Legal History," <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/legal-history/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

well.

July 2010 (Rosh Chodesh Av): Anat Hoffman's Arrest⁶¹

Following this Rosh Chodesh service, Women of the Wall Chairwoman, Anat Hoffman, was dramatically detained as she left the Kotel entrance carrying a Torah scroll. Police blocked the procession of women from leaving as they attempted to pry the Torah scroll from her arms. She was detained for not praying according to the ultra-Orthodox custom at the Kotel.

2011: Solidarity Events

Anat Hoffman's arrest received great media attention and triggered solidarity events all over the world. Synagogues, organizations, and individuals held Rosh Chodesh services in support and gave lectures to educate others on Women of the Wall's current events. One of the organized solidarity events was the Torah Campaign in which people took photos holding Torah scrolls and posted them to social media accounts.

2012: Detainments

In 2012 alone, WOW experienced more detainments than in any other previous year, with over twenty arrests. Women were being detained by police for simply praying with a tallit and were accused of disturbing the public order. Detainees included WOW board members, American rabbis, and gap year students from the UK. In most cases, the detained participants were taken into a Jerusalem police station and interrogated for approximately three hours before being released.

⁶¹ Please see Chapter 2 for more details.

October 16, 2012: Anat Hoffman Arrested and Taken into Police Custody

On this evening, the Hadassah Centennial Convention arranged to join in prayer and song with Women of the Wall at the Kotel. Together in the women's section, Anat Hoffman began by welcoming the Hadassah women and explaining WOWs' mission. Hoffman recalls in her written testimony that:

At this stage, Policewoman Ahuva Askalsi came up to me and demanded that I wear my Tallit like a scarf. I did as she asked, but while I was speaking one side of the Tallit dropped back to its normal position. She again approached me, warned me not to let it drop down again, and told me that I must wrap the Tallit around my neck like a scarf. I did as she asked, but commented to the women that there is no mention of this requirement by the police in the Supreme Court ruling, and that this is an invention of the police.⁶²

Following Hoffman's welcoming words, rabbinical and cantorial students from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Jerusalem led the attendees in the *Shema*, the prayer of God's oneness with the Jewish people. It was to be a moment of thanksgiving and praise, as Hadassah women stood in support of Women of the Wall. Instead, mid-prayer, a male police officer then approached Hoffman and ordered her to lower her voice. She lowered her voice but did not cease praying. Evidently, Hoffman's response to the officer's order was insufficient, and she was placed under arrest and escorted from the Kotel plaza.

That evening, Hoffman was handcuffed, shackled, interrogated and held overnight

⁶² Testimony of Anat Hoffman concerning the events of Tuesday, October 16th and Wednesday, October 17, 2012, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/official-testimony-of-anat-hoffman/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

in a jail cell. She was also roughly handled as one officer bent her arm back as well as tightened the handcuffs around her wrists so that they cut into her skin. In her testimony of the arrest, Hoffman explained that she believed her mistreatment was a scare tactic on multiple levels. First, it was a way to frighten her into being released the same evening without the court hearing the case. Second, the arrest was a means to silence the leader and intimidate members of the group.⁶³

During her interrogation, Anat Hoffman was informed that she “was being investigated for ‘disobeying a lawful instruction, behaving in a manner liable to disturb the peace,’ and ‘offending religious sentiments.’”⁶⁴ She was told that she did this by wearing a tallit in the Western Wall plaza and leading others in song. After the court hearing the following morning, Hoffman was given a thirty day restraining order from the Western Wall.

December 2012: Women of the Wall Case Revisited

In 2012, Prime Minister Netanyahu asked Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky to examine women’s rights for prayer at the Western Wall. The Jewish Agency for Israel is a Jewish non-profit organization whose mission is to: “Inspire Jews throughout the world to connect with their People, heritage, and homeland, and empower them to build a thriving Jewish future and a strong Israel.”⁶⁵ However, it would not be until April of 2013 that a plan would be proposed.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The Jewish Agency, “Homepage,” <http://www.jewishagency.org> (accessed November 23, 2016).

February 11, 2013: IDF Paratroopers Stand with Women of the Wall

Israeli paratroopers who liberated the Kotel in 1967 joined hundreds of WOW worshippers to bring in the new month. Police detained ten women for wearing tallitot. The paratroopers in attendance at the service included Dr. Yitzhak Yiftah and Eilon Bartov. Dr. Yiftah, a paratrooper that can be seen in the iconic photograph of the Kotel's liberation taken by David Rubinger, spoke out about his support of Women of the Wall. "I decided to come here to show my support for all those who wish to pray at the Kotel whatever way they wish, so long as they are not doing anything immoral," said Yiftah. "It breaks my heart that the ultra-Orthodox have decided the Kotel belongs to them."⁶⁶ Despite a peaceful prayer service, after the paratroopers left the Kotel plaza, ten women were arrested for donning tallitot as they exited the women's section.

March 12, 2013 (Rosh Chodesh Nissan): Members of Knesset Pray with WOW

On Rosh Chodesh Nissan, members of the Knesset came to pray with Women of the Wall. The members of Knesset included Tamar Sandberg from the Meretz Party and Stav Shafir from the Zionist Union Party. This was a public display of support from members of the Israeli government. On this morning, women prayed with tefillin and tallitot without police intervention for the first time in twenty-two months.

April 2013: Judge Sharon Larry Bavli's Groundbreaking Court Decision

After five Women of the Wall worshippers were arrested for praying with tallitot at

⁶⁶ Adam Chandler, "Women of the Wall and Paratroopers Join Ranks," *Tablet*, February 11, 2013, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/123895/women-of-the-wall-and-idf-paratroopers-join-ranks> (accessed May 3, 2017).

a Rosh Chodesh service on April 11, “police accused the women of disturbing the public order and requested that the judge ban them from the Western Wall for the following three Rosh Chodesh prayer dates.”⁶⁷ However, after reviewing all of the evidence, Jerusalem Magistrate Court Judge Sharon Larry-Bavli ruled that there was no cause for arresting the women and furthermore, that “it was not Women of the Wall who initiated the provocation.”⁶⁸ The women were released with no conditions. The police appealed this decision and the case *The State of Israel, Israel Police vs. Lesley Sachs, Bonnie Riva Ras, Sylvie Rozenbaum, Rabbi Valerie Stessin and Sharona Kramer*, was further investigated by Jerusalem District Court Judge Moshe Sobel.

April 25, 2013: The Historic Sobel Ruling

In 2013, in response to five WOW members who were arrested during a Rosh Hodesh service, Judge Moshe Sobel granted Women of the Wall the legal right to pray according to their custom. Judge Sobel ruled that the “local custom” needed to be defined to meet the customs of all who prayed at the Western Wall. He based his decision on the written opinions of several Supreme Court justices from previous cases, specifically that of Justice Shlomo Levin. During a 1994 case, Justice Levin wrote, “As I see it, the phrase ‘local custom’ should not necessarily be interpreted according to Jewish law or according to the *status quo*. The nature of a custom is that it changes according to the changing times, and [the phrase] should express a pluralistic and tolerant approach to the opinions

⁶⁷ Women of the Wall, “Legal History,” <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/legal-history/> (accessed November 23, 2016).

⁶⁸ Women of the Wall, “Police Appeal against Women of the Wall: Insist that Women’s Prayer is a Disturbance,” 23 April 2013, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/april23pressrelease/> (accessed November 23, 2016).

and customs of others...”⁶⁹ Still, since the Sobel ruling, Women of the Wall have struggled to read from a Torah scroll in the women’s section of the Western Wall. Rabbi Rabinowitz has disregarded the Sobel ruling and continues to follow the 2010 regulation he issued, which was approved by the Ministry of Justice.

April 2013: The Sharansky Plan

Following the Sobel Ruling, Chairman Natan Sharansky presented a proposal to Women of the Wall and a coalition of Jewish leaders from both America and Israel. It was then that negotiations began for the creation of a visible, third egalitarian plaza—a place where men and women could pray together. It would also be a place for pluralistic prayer. The hope was that this section would be built on the southern part of the Western Wall (Robinson’s Arch). Many Jewish organizations and representatives of various Jewish denominations have been involved in the negotiations over this matter, but with the Israeli government elections in January of 2013, there was a hiatus in the negotiations.

April 24, 2013: New Organization ‘Women *For* the Wall’ Created

As a result of rising tensions surrounding a resolution regarding Women of the Wall’s prayer at the Western Wall, the organization ‘Women *For* the Wall’ (W4W) was created. This Israeli ultra-Orthodox group describe themselves as “a new grassroots

⁶⁹ Appeal by the State of Israel 23834-04-13 State of Israel v. Ras et al., (Jerusalem District Court Before the Honorable Judge Moshe Sobel), <http://derechoyreligion.uc.cl/en/docman/documentacion/internacional/jurisprudencia-1/671-sentencia-de-la-corte-de-distrito-de-jerusalen-sobre-autorizacion-a-mujeres-a-rezar-con-indumentaria-reservada-a-los-hombres-en-el-muro-de-los-lamentos/file> (accessed May 3, 2017).

organization concerned with the sanctity of the Western Wall.”⁷⁰ W4W was created in direct response to Women of the Wall and out of concern that the Western Wall would be transformed from a place of worship into a “(secular) national monument.”⁷¹

May 10, 2013: Rosh Chodesh Sivan Prayer, Protest, and Police Protection

During 2013, Women of the Wall grew from 30 to 300 attending supporters, and after being granted freedom of religious expression at the Kotel, on May 10, 2013, Rosh Chodesh Sivan, WOW prayed with tallitot without any detainments. As a result of a appeal from Rabbi Rabinowitz, ultra-Orthodox rabbis bused in *yeshiva* girls to fill up the women’s section of the Western Wall so that WOW could not pray there.⁷² In addition, approximately three thousand ultra-Orthodox men and women came to protest against WOW following Rabbi Rabinowitz’s call to action.⁷³ The police formed a human barricade, each officer linking arms. They were not arresting WOW; they were guarding the worshippers, allowing them to pray according to their custom. The police held back ultra-Orthodox men as they attempted to attack worshippers. The men yelled, cursed, threw rocks at Women of the Wall worshippers, and blew whistles to drown out the women’s voices in prayer. Still, despite the pandemonium, Women of the Wall prayed

⁷⁰ Women For the Wall, “W4w Decries Proposal for “National Monument,” April 24, 2013, <http://womenforthewall.org/2013/04/w4w-decries-proposal-for-national-monument/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Yitzhak Reiter, “Feminists in the Temple of Orthodoxy: The Struggle of the Women of the Wall to Change the Status Quo,” *Shofar* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 79–107, doi:10.1353/sho.2016.0001, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Feminists-in-the-Temple-of-Orthodoxy-The-Struggle-of-the-Women-of-the-Wall-to-Change-the-Status-Quo-.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁷³ Michele Chabin, “At Western Wall, a Clash over Women Praying,” *USA TODAY*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/05/10/israel-western-wall-women/2149923/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

Hallel.⁷⁴ A rabbinical student⁷⁵ from HUC-JIR led the service with the assistance of Cantor Tamar Havilio.⁷⁶ Upon exiting, police officers set up a path toward the Dung Gate and formed a human barricade so Women of the Wall could safely make their way out of the Kotel Plaza. Buses waited at the gate to secure a safe exit for the Women of the Wall worshippers. As the prayer group waited to leave, ultra-Orthodox boys threw rocks at the buses, harassing them.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Hallel (meaning “praise” in Hebrew) is a Jewish service consisting of the recitation of psalms for praise and thanksgiving, observed on Rosh Chodesh (the start of the Jewish month) and certain Jewish festivals.

⁷⁵ See Appendix C for the name of this rabbinical student.

⁷⁶ “HUC-JIR Leads Women of the Wall in Prayer on Rosh Chodesh Sivan,” May 24, 2013, <http://huc.edu/news/article/2013/huc-jir-leads-women-wall-prayer-rosh-chodesh-sivan> (accessed January 2, 2017).

⁷⁷ Judy Maltz and Yair Ettinger, “Backlash Against Women of the Wall //Protesters Hurl Rocks in Clashes over Women of the Wall Prayer Service at Kotel,” *Haaretz*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/protesters-hurl-rocks-in-clashes-over-women-of-the-wall-prayer-service-at-kotel.premium-1.523333> (accessed May 15, 2017).



Police restrain an ultra-Orthodox man.

Credit: Noam Revkin Fenton, May 10, 2013.



Guards hold back the crowd of ultra-Orthodox boys and men during protest.

Credit: Noam Revkin Fenton, May 10, 2013.



Guards link arms to form a human barricade.

Credit: Scott Gellman, May 10, 2013.



May 10, 2013: The author of this thesis, then a first-year Rabbinical Student from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion leads, Women of the Wall in prayer.

Credit: *Huffington Post*, May 10, 2013.



Women of the Wall pray in the Upper Plaza amidst surrounding protests.

Credit: Noam Revkin Fenton, May 10, 2013.

October 2013: Conditions for a Third Section at the Western Wall (“The Mandelblit Plan”)⁷⁸

Women of the Wall agreed to enter into negotiations for an egalitarian third section at the Western Wall under the supervision of Avichai Mandelblit,⁷⁹ Israel’s Cabinet Secretary. The prayer group prepared a list of conditions for its vision. One of these conditions was the creation of one main entrance to the Kotel that would allow worshippers and visitors to clearly see the choice of all three sections—*Ezrat Giborim*, *Ezrat Nashim* and the new section proposed by WOW, *Ezrat Yisrael*. Another proposed condition would be the establishment of a committee, which would include rabbis and leaders from the Progressive and Masorti movements in Israel, as well as WOW leaders that would oversee the new section. This proposed oversight committee would help to safeguard religious pluralism in the new section. The proposed list of conditions was submitted to Mandelblit. In the meantime, WOW continues to sponsor prayer services in the women’s section until such time that the third section is created and completed to the satisfaction of the multi-denominational women’s prayer group.

October 2013: Emergence of the Original-Women of the Wall Prayer group⁸⁰

A difference of opinion broke out over Women of the Wall’s decision to enter into negotiations for a new third section and its departure from the original mission of praying in the women’s section according to their customs. A group of women decided to leave Women of the Wall and continue on as their own prayer group, giving themselves

⁷⁸ Please see Chapter 4 for more details.

⁷⁹ Avichai Mandelblit (b. 1963): Became the Cabinet Secretary in April 2013. Also, Mandelblit became the Attorney General of Israel in February 2016.

⁸⁰ Please see Chapter 4 for more details.

the title Original-Women of the Wall.

November 4, 2013: Women of the Wall's 25th Anniversary

On November 4, 2013, approximately 1000 people gathered to mark the 25th anniversary of WOW as well as the prayer services that the group had sponsored for a quarter century. The anniversary service included rabbis, students, and WOW supporters from all over Israel as well as from abroad. About 150 people flew to Israel for this special occasion, recognizing the perseverance of Women of the Wall's struggle for twenty-five years. In a WOW press release, the Director of Public Relations wrote that "the women also recited a blessing together under canopies of prayer shawls, symbolizing the special gathering of this sisterhood in shared space, at the Kotel."⁸¹ The prayer service concluded with the singing of Israel's national anthem, "Hatikvah," expressing "the group's commitment to women's equality in prayer at the Western Wall as a holy, public space in Israel."⁸² According to the press release, the singing of the Israeli national anthem signified WOW's aspirations for Israel—a state wherein religious freedom would reign so that Jewish women would be part of an "*am chofshi*," a "free people."

October 12, 2014: Bat Mitzvah Campaign

Women of the Wall launched its first ad campaign on Jerusalem public buses, promoting Bat Mitzvah ceremonies at the Western Wall. "The campaign ads feature

⁸¹ Women of the Wall, "1000 Pray with Women of the Wall in the Women's Section of the Western Wall Celebrating 25 Years of Sisterhood, Prayer and Struggle for Equal Rights," November 4, 2013, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/pressreleasenov413/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁸² Ibid.

Israeli girls,⁸³ ages eleven to fourteen, wearing a tallit, a traditional Jewish prayer shawl, and holding a Torah scroll in front of the Western Wall. The busses [sic] spread these ads throughout Jerusalem informing all riders that girls could now become *B'not Mitzvah* under the auspices of Women of the Wall.”⁸⁴ One ad reads in Hebrew: “*Ima, gam ani rotzah lachgog bat mitzvah im Nashot HaKotel*” (Mom, I too want to celebrate a bat mitzvah with Women of the Wall). The second ad reads in Hebrew: “*Zot haTorah. Achshav tori. Tekes bat mitzvah im Nashot HaKotel*” (This is the Torah: Now it is my turn. Bat Mitzvah Ceremony with Women of the Wall).

October 24, 2014: First Bat Mitzvah with Torah Scroll at the Western Wall

On October 24, 2014, Women of the Wall witnessed a historic moment as the organization sponsored the first ever Bat Mitzvah⁸⁵ with a Torah scroll in the women’s section of the Kotel. It was completed with a kosher miniature Torah scroll that was brought in through security.

May 7, 2015: Full-Size Torah Scroll in Women’s Section

Women of the Wall again read from the Torah, but this time, from a full-size Torah. With the help of male supporters, WOW was given a Torah scroll from the men’s side. However, when the male supporter opened the *mechitzah* gate to pass the women a Torah scroll, ultra-Orthodox men reacted violently, attacking some of WOW’s male supporters.

⁸³ Please see Appendix C for the list of participants involved in the campaign.

⁸⁴ Women of the Wall, “Women of the Wall Launch Public Bus Campaign: ‘Mom, I Too Want a Bat Mitzvah at the Kotel,’” October 12, 2014, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/women-of-the-wall-launch-public-bus-campaign-mom-i-too-want-a-bat-mitzvah-at-the-kotel-2/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁸⁵ Please see Appendix C for the name of the *bat mitzvah*.

Legally, the April 2013 Jerusalem District Court ‘Sobel Decision’ guaranteed Women of the Wall the right to pray freely, according to their tradition; however, Rabbi Rabinowitz, the Chairman of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, subsequently instituted local regulations that disallowed bringing a Torah scroll through the entrance to the Kotel. His regulations also refused women access to even one of the 100 scrolls held at the Western Wall for “public” use.

December 2015: International Hanukkah Campaign “It’s My Right to Light”

Every year, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation holds a national candle-lighting ceremony at the Kotel for Hanukkah. Historically, however, this national ceremony has not included women. In 2015, Women of the Wall appealed to Israeli leaders either to reject the national ceremony or to include women in its planned ceremony.

In support of WOW’s appeal, Rabbi Jackie Ellenson, Director Emerita of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, and Rabbi Sydney Mintz, past Women’s Rabbinic Network Executive Board member, initiated a solidarity event in America called “It’s My Right to Light.” The solidarity event asked supporters of Israeli pluralism and equal rights to petition to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in support of women’s candle-lighting at the Western Wall. In addition, supporters were asked to take a picture lighting a Hanukkah menorah, upload this picture onto social media sites, and attach an identifier of ‘Women of the Wall’ onto their pictures to create social awareness. Women of the Wall received an outpouring of support through letters, pictures and donations. Women of the Wall’s board member, legal advisor Riki Shapira-Rosenberg, requested the Attorney General of Israel, Advisor Yehuda Weinstein, that Rabbi Rabinowitz “be instructed to include women in the national Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony in one of the

following two ways: 1. To hold another ceremony for Hanukkah candle-lighting in the women's section; 2. To hold the national ceremony in the upper plaza of the Western Wall and to invite men and women to participate, equally."⁸⁶ The Attorney General ordered Rabbi Rabinowitz to include women in the candle-lighting ceremony.

Women of the Wall also gained the support of Knesset members Tamar Zandberg (political party Meretz), Michal Rozin (Meretz), and Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union) who wrote letters of support to Rabbi Rabinowitz on WOW's behalf, with a request that he allow women to take part in the official candle-lighting ceremony at the Kotel.

On December 6, the first night of Hanukkah, Women of the Wall held their own candle-lighting ceremony in the women's section. The prayer group succeeded with the help of Knesset member Svetlova "who used her parliamentary immunity to bring the communal menorah into the site."⁸⁷ WOW held a communal candle-lighting in which approximately one hundred women attended. Still, despite petitions, the national ceremony was held in the men's section of the Western Wall. A second, smaller ceremony was held in another location surrounding the Western Wall plaza, which did include females who were government officials. To Women of the Wall, this second ceremony was viewed as being unequal to the national ceremony held in the men's section, in which Prime Minister Netanyahu participated.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Women of the Wall, "It's My Right to Light," November 30, 2015, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/its-my-right-to-light-2/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁸⁷ JTA, "Women light Hanukkah candles at Western Wall," *The Times of Israel*, December 7, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/women-light-hanukkah-candles-at-western-wall/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

4) Era of Collaboration, Division, and Negotiations (2016–Present)

The initiation of negotiations for a third egalitarian section at the Western Wall seems to be the beginning of a fourth new era. Although these negotiations began in 2013, the year 2016 marks the first signal of government approval of the Mandelblit Plan. This era has brought much collaboration between the progressive Jewish denominations in Israel. Nevertheless, as Women of the Wall draws closer to an agreement for a third section, further divide occurs within Women of the Wall's own prayer group.

January 31, 2016: Mandelblit Plan Accepted

After more than two years of negotiations for a third egalitarian section at the Western Wall, Prime Minister Netanyahu and the government accepted the proposed plan for the building of a third section at the Western Wall. This plan was overseen by Government Secretary Avichai Mandelblit and designed in coordination with leaders of the Reform/Progressive and Conservative/Masorti movements in North America and Israel as well as with the Jewish Agency.

April 24, 2016: Women's Priestly Benediction for Passover

On the morning of the first day of Passover, Women of the Wall held a women's prayer for freedom ceremony and, simultaneously, recited the Priestly Blessing⁸⁹ in the women's section of the Kotel for the first time. Women of the Wall referred to this

⁸⁹ Priestly Blessing (known as "Birkat Ha-Kohanim" in Hebrew): The ritual takes place on certain Jewish festivals in which men who identify with the Priestly class (Kohanim) offer God's blessings upon their congregations. While one's Jewish tribal heritage has always been traced through men, Jewish law does not dismiss women from taking part in this ritual of blessing. As women have never been invited to take part in the yearly benediction that takes place in the men's section, this year, Women of the Wall chose to hold their own Priestly Benediction at the Western Wall.

blessing as the *Birkat Kohanot*, which is a feminization of the Hebrew term *Birkat Ha-Kohanim*. This feminized terminology was intended to demonstrate that this recitation of the blessing was being offered “by women [and] for women,” instead of the traditional phrase which implies that the blessing was offered by male priests.

This particular event as well as the female recitation of the “Priestly Blessing” received financial support from Susan Bay Nimoy and the estate of Leonard Nimoy, the Jewish actor best known for his portrayal of the character Dr. Spock in the *Star Trek* series. Nimoy adapted the Priestly Benediction hand symbol for his character’s Vulcan salute. Women of the Wall wrote in a press release that “He took something precious from antiquity and brought it to the ‘future.’ His benediction, ‘Live Long and Prosper,’ takes one of the best messages from the Jewish faith and transforms it into a universal message of peace, purpose and prosperity.”⁹⁰ This women’s Priestly Benediction was a partnership between WOW and the Nimoy Estate in order to offer women an experience never before permitted at the Western Wall.⁹¹ Each attendee at the prayer service also received a pin in the shape of the Vulcan salute hand, symbolizing the Priestly Blessing.

September 12, 2016—Supreme Court Reprimands State for Ignoring Mandelblit Plan Agreement

At a hearing, Israel’s Supreme Court rebuked the State for not implementing its own plan to create a pluralistic prayer section at the Western Wall. Present at the court hearing were Anat Hoffman, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, Director of the IMPJ, and Yizhar Hess,

⁹⁰ Women of the Wall, “Women of the Wall to Hold Women’s Priestly Blessing for the First Time at the Kotel,” March 21, 2016, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/women-of-the-wall-to-hold-womens-priestly-blessing-for-the-first-time-at-the-kotel/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁹¹ Ibid.

Director of the Masorti Movement. The Court gave a warning to the Israeli government and would intervene if the Mandelblit plan was not implemented.⁹²

November 2, 2016 (Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan): Torah Scrolls in the Women's Section

On this date, WOW—with both Israeli and American leaders⁹³—made their way into the women's section of the Western Wall with fourteen Torah scrolls, an unprecedented success. Police did not help to protect WOW worshippers from ultra-Orthodox protesters and ushers from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation who pushed and shoved those trying to enter the Kotel plaza with Torah scrolls in their arms. Some WOW supporters were even knocked over from the violence. Nevertheless, from the perspective of WOW, the success of bringing such a larger number of Torah scrolls into the women's section was viewed as a real achievement.⁹⁴ Both Israeli and American leaders from various Jewish denominations and organizations that support religious pluralism and women's equality attended this historic Rosh Chodesh service. Prime Minister Netanyahu's office accused the liberal Jewish leaders of causing “unnecessary friction,” but Women of the Wall saw their planned actions as “civil disobedience to protest Netanyahu for failing to implement the Western Wall Agreement passed by his

⁹² Amanda Borschel-Dan, “High Court scolds government for not upholding Western Wall deal,” *The Times of Israel*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/supreme-court-scolds-government-for-not-upholding-western-wall-deal/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁹³ Please see Appendix C for list of leaders.

⁹⁴ Times of Israel Staff, “In ‘historic’ first, women pray with Torah scrolls at Western Wall,” *The Times of Israel*, November 02, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-historic-first-pluralistic-worshippers-bring-torah-scrolls-to-western-wall/> (accessed May 17, 2017).

own government in January, 2016.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

Women of the Wall has fought in numerous court cases since 1989. The prayer group has experienced many setbacks but also many advancements as they have gained support through solidarity events and the media. Still, the prayer group has faced relentless government stonewalling all the way up to and including the present. As of January 2017, Women of the Wall continues to await the implementation of the Western Wall compromise for the construction of an egalitarian plaza.

⁹⁵ Isabel Kershner, “Netanyahu Criticizes American Jewish Leaders over Western Wall Protest,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/middleeast/israel-jerusalem-netanyahu-western-wall.html?_r=0 (access May 15, 2017). Women of the Wall, *Torah Procession: An Act of Civil Disobedience: Women of the Wall March to the Kotel Alongside World Jewish Leaders Carrying Torah Scrolls*, 2016, <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/rabbis-in-unprecedented-act-of-civil-disobedience-to-protest-netanyahu/> (accessed May 15, 2017).

CHAPTER 1: WOMEN IN THE RELIGIOUS, PUBLIC SPHERE

Israel is a complicated nation when it comes to women's equality in the public sphere. On one hand, it is ahead of its time in permitting women into the *political*, public sphere. From 1969-1973, Golda Meir served as Israel's first female Prime Minister. On the other hand, Israel is behind the time in permitting women into the *religious*, public sphere. As a result of Israel's political-religious structure, women have been barred from active participation in the religious public sphere. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the current governing system in Israel that allows this inequity and discuss Women of the Wall's effects on women in the religious public sphere in Israeli society. In the area of women's equality and women's empowerment, Women of the Wall has had three main effects on Israeli society: 1) It has been a source of consciousness-raising for women's religious equality; 2) It has been a source of Jewish women's empowerment; and 3) It has helped maintain a space for Jewish women to exercise their religious rights in the public sphere. The unequal treatment of women at the Western Wall serves as a representation of the tensions—one of them being gender inequality—caused by a lack of separation of religion and state in Israel's governmental structure.

Israel's Governmental Structure

The phrase used to describe the character of Israel is "Jewish and democratic." This phrase was first used in the State Education Law of 1953. It is a reminder for Israel to strive towards a balance between its values of religion and social equality. Finding this balance still remains a challenge for Israeli society today. Currently, this tension is particularly apparent at the Kotel and intrinsic to the Women of the Wall controversy.

A look at Israel's political-religious structure will help explain the cause of this

societal imbalance. Israel's governing structure consists of the Knesset—a parliamentary democracy in which the ultra-Orthodox currently hold authority in the coalition—and the Chief Rabbinate—an ultra-Orthodox rabbinic authority that oversees all personal status changes. While the Knesset's religious configuration can change based on the makeup of the current coalition, the Chief Rabbinate is unequally composed of Jewish leadership from Israel's ultra-Orthodox faction.

Currently, the Chief Rabbinate is the public arbiter for almost all life cycle events and personal status changes in Israel.⁹⁶ It is recognized by law as the “supreme, halakhic and spiritual authority for the Jewish people in the State of Israel. It has legal and administrative authority to organize religious arrangements for Israel's Jews.”⁹⁷ This non-democratic institution permits the public status of Judaism (what is known as the “local custom”) to be defined by ultra-Orthodoxy. This “local custom” of ultra-Orthodoxy does not take into consideration those Jews who choose to live an alternate Jewish lifestyle, practicing a Jewish denomination other than ultra-Orthodoxy. With no separation of religion and state, Israel permits Orthodox authorities to place Jewish denominations on a hierarchy, causing tension within the nation's own Jewish people as well as those living in the diaspora.

The Status-Quo Agreement was a legal arrangement established in 1947 in a letter from Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to political leaders of religious parties. The arrangement sought to maintain equilibrium between Israel's religious life and its secular population. Its aim was to find ways to implement Israel's religious character without

⁹⁶ For example, all weddings, divorces, conversions, and funerals must be overseen and officiated by the ultra-Orthodox authorities.

⁹⁷ Zionist Organization of America, Jewish Agency for Israel, and Economic Dept., *Israel Yearbook and Almanac*, Vol. 46 (Jerusalem: IBRT Translation/Documentation Ltd, 1992), 195.

allowing regulations to infringe on the secular majority. It was created to preserve the socio-political compromise of 1947 between the religious and secular character of the state of Israel. This approach has been labeled the “status quo model.”⁹⁸ While this model attempts to maintain the societal norms that existed during the foundation of Israel, the “Status Quo Agreement” conflicts with the evolving nature of present-day Israeli society. Today, many people feel that Israel needs to distribute religious power among the various branches in order to balance the needs of every Jewish denomination. This conflict cannot be avoided, and it is likely to generate new societal resolutions. Tensions stemming from the current unequal arrangement of religion and state are strongly demonstrated through the Women of the Wall controversy. Court judges have grappled with the question of what is the “local custom” at the Western Wall. Must it be defined by the status quo of ultra-Orthodoxy? How can Israel be fair to those who desire to practice non-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall? The range of Jewish practice that exists in Israel today is different from 1947 when the “Status Quo Agreement” was implemented.

Ultra-Orthodoxy and Gender Egalitarianism

As a result of the ultra-Orthodox monopoly, which brings with it a patriarchal leadership, the possibility of full gender equality in Israeli society is hampered. The foundation of ultra-Orthodoxy was formed in response to modernity.⁹⁹ This

⁹⁸ Daphne Barak-Erez, “Law and Religion under the Status Quo Model: Between Past Compromises and Constant Change,” *Cardozo Law Review* 30, no. 6 (2009): 2495, <http://www.tau.ac.il/law/barakerez/artmarch2010/36.pdf>. (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁹⁹ Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 140.

denomination rejects the ideas of modernity for fear that it will overpower Judaism. Subsequently, the only way to maintain tradition is to “stand still” in Judaism’s ways, becoming strict in adherence to Judaism’s deep-rooted but often anachronistic traditions. For example, traditional domestic roles and halakha (Jewish law) are adhered to even though they do not align with twenty-first century secular societal norms. While in America the more liberal Reform Judaism holds the status as the largest Jewish denomination, in Israel it is the smallest denomination. Therefore, as ultra-Orthodox Judaism is the religion of the rabbinate—the legal, rabbinic authority in Israel—the patriarchal voice of this denomination overwhelms the egalitarian sentiments of other practicing streams of Judaism.¹⁰⁰ This religious clash leads to the inferiority of women in the religious public sphere, obstructing Jewish egalitarianism.

Jewish egalitarianism—gender equality in religious and cultural ritual performance and observance—has not been accepted by the state of Israel. One of the most central principles uniting Reform, Reconstructionist, and most Conservative congregations in America is that of egalitarianism.¹⁰¹ In these denominations, women are permitted to read Torah as well as to enter the rabbinate. However, in ultra-Orthodoxy, both in America and in Israel, egalitarianism has yet to be accepted.

Gender and Halakha at the Western Wall

Once a month, Women of the Wall gathers at the Western Wall to hold a Rosh Chodesh service. Rosh Chodesh literally means “head of the month” and the service

¹⁰⁰ Yael Israel-Cohen, *Between Feminism and Orthodox Judaism: Resistance, Identity, and Religious Change in Israel* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 17.

¹⁰¹ Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2007), 62.

celebrates each new Jewish month. As Judaism runs on the lunar calendar, the new month begins with each new moon. Observing Rosh Chodesh has always been a special holiday for women—for biblical and Talmudic reasons—and dates back to sixteenth century Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) as a female ritual practice.¹⁰² However, with the Western Wall under the auspices of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation,¹⁰³ the once national site has been functioning according to Ultra-Orthodox customs. Despite Rosh Chodesh being a traditional female practice, this poses many religious barriers for Women of the Wall's multi-denominational prayer group.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz currently oversees the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, serving as the Rabbi of the Western Wall and the Holy Sites of Israel. He ensures that all who pray at the site adhere to strict halakha. These regulations necessarily negate other ways to be Jewish as well as other interpretations of Jewish textual tradition. Over time, ultra-Orthodox opponents of Women of the Wall have used halakha to repudiate the actions of the women's prayer group. Four main halakhic arguments have been brought up to bar Women of the Wall from praying according to its customs: 1. Women are not obligated to perform public prayer;¹⁰⁴ 2. A woman's voice is forbidden in public;¹⁰⁵ 3. Praying with a tallit (prayer shawl) is a male-only commandment; and 4. Women are forbidden from participating in a public Torah reading.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Leah Novick, "The History of Rosh Chodesh and Its Evolution as a Woman's Holiday," in *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, ed. Susan Berrin (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 18.

¹⁰³ For more information on the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, visit http://english.thekotel.org/heritage_foundation/.

¹⁰⁴ For more information see Rabbi Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2001).

¹⁰⁵ For a helpful digest of the subject, see Schreiber, "The Woman's Voice in the Synagogue."

¹⁰⁶ For more information, see Eliezer Berkovits, *The Jewish Woman in Time and Torah* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1990).

Despite the many halakhic arguments against women's public participation in Jewish religious practice, in 2013, Judge Moshe Sobel granted Women of the Wall the legal right to pray according to its custom. Judge Sobel ruled that the "local custom" needed to be defined to meet the customs of all who prayed at the Western Wall. He based his decision on the written opinions of several Supreme Court justices from previous cases, specifically that of Justice Shlomo Levin. During a 1994 case, Justice Levin wrote:

As I see it, the phrase 'local custom' should not necessarily be interpreted according to Jewish law or according to the *status quo*. The nature of a custom is that it changes according to the changing times, and [the phrase] should express a pluralistic and tolerant approach to the opinions and customs of others...¹⁰⁷

Still, since the Sobel ruling, Women of the Wall has struggled to pray from a Torah scroll in the women's section of the Western Wall, while the men's section has over one hundred Torah scrolls.¹⁰⁸ Rabbi Rabinowitz has disregarded the Sobel ruling and continues to follow the 2010 regulation he issued, which was approved by the Ministry of Justice. This regulation states that security guards at the Western Wall entrance are allowed to prevent the admission of any Torah scroll that has not been approved by the rabbi of the Kotel.¹⁰⁹ This makes a Torah service in the women's section nearly impossible. Lesley Sachs, explains that, "currently, there is an appeal to the court to instruct Rabinowitz to cancel this regulation, but the court wants to discuss the entire

¹⁰⁷ Appeal by the State of Israel 23834-04-13 State of Israel v. Ras et al.

¹⁰⁸ "גוהל הכנסת ספרי תורה לרחבת הכותל המערבי," 2016,

<https://www.thekotel.org/hakeren/nehelim/klale/torah.aspx> (accessed January 8, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Kotel issue in one bulk.”¹¹⁰ In a *Jerusalem Post* article entitled “Is the Western Wall rabbi above the law?” defense lawyer David Barhoom argued that:

Judge Sobel’s groundbreaking ruling should have led to the nullification of the procedure introduced in 2010. Yet although this procedure is now unlawful, the Western Wall rabbi continues to apply its provisions, thereby effectively circumventing the court ruling that WoW forms part of ‘local custom.’ The rabbi also undermines the court ruling that women are permitted to read from the Torah in the Women’s Section. In short – the rabbi acts as if he were above the law.¹¹¹

In November 2016, Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, the prayer group managed to bring fourteen Torah scrolls into the women’s section with the support of many liberal Jewish leaders.¹¹² Still, as of January 2017, at each Rosh Chodesh, Women of the Wall struggle to pray with even one Torah scroll, a right removed from women at what is considered to be the holiest site for the Jewish people.

Women of the Wall’s Effects on Israeli Society

As ultra-Orthodoxy is the dominant Jewish denomination in Israel, its adherence to halakha, which undermines female ritual practice, has hindered the advancement of egalitarianism in the Israeli religious public sphere. Nonetheless, gradual steps have been

¹¹⁰ Email correspondence with Lesley Sachs, “Thesis Question,” January 8, 2017.

¹¹¹ David Barhoom, “Is the Western Wall Rabbi Above the Law?” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 6, 2015, <http://m.jpost.com/Opinion/Is-the-Western-Wall-rabbi-above-the-law-421110#article=6022MDM0M0RBMzRBNTBCNDg3RTNDQjFGOUNDNkIyREEzNTQ=> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹¹² Isabel Kershner, “Netanyahu Criticizes American Jewish Leaders over Western Wall Protest,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/middleeast/israel-jerusalem-netanyahu-western-wall.html>, (accessed May 3, 2017).

taken to create equal space for women in religious life. In the area of women's equality and women's empowerment, Women of the Wall has had three main effects on Israeli society: consciousness-raising, Jewish women's empowerment, and maintaining women's religious space in the public sphere.

1) Consciousness-raising

First, while primarily a women's prayer group, Women of the Wall has also served as a consciousness-raising group in Israeli Jewish society. Consciousness-raising can be defined as "any method for increasing interpersonal awareness or sensitivity by teaching people to experience a situation or point of view radically different from their own."¹¹³ Women of the Wall, a multi-denominational prayer group, has brought to Israeli society a greater awareness that there is more than one way to be Jewish and that women can fully participate in Jewish life. A member of Original Women of the Wall, Cheryl Birkner Mack, explains that she feels Women of the Wall has "brought an awareness that hadn't been there before about women's religious rights."¹¹⁴ More specifically, she explains that today, when religious Jews arrive at the Kotel, they witness a religious practice that is different from their own. Mack recalled a time *davening* at the Kotel while a *bar mitzvah* ceremony was taking place in the men's section. She remembers how two little kids kept looking over the *mechitza* at the women's prayer group:

I kept thinking these little kids are going to grow up with the knowledge
that women pray, and some women wear tallit, and some women wear

¹¹³ Definition of consciousness-raising, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/consciousness-raising> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹¹⁴ Transcript of interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 5.

tefillin,... something probably twenty-eight to thirty years ago a lot of kids didn't have [a sense of], in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem. Yes, I think we have brought that to consciousness.¹¹⁵

At the Western Wall, ultra-Orthodox Jews today are exposed to a Jewish religious practice that is different from what they are accustomed. Whether or not this denomination approves of and allows this alternative way of Jewish practice to take place at the Kotel, these Jews are witnesses to an active and fervent women's observance of Rosh Chodesh.

A more intentional example of Women of the Wall's consciousness-raising was its first advertisement campaign on Jerusalem public buses in October 2014. Pictured on the buses were girls holding Torah scrolls with the quote, "Mom, I too want to celebrate a bat mitzvah."¹¹⁶ Shira Pruce, Women of the Wall's first Public Relations Coordinator, explained that this type of activism "felt like real, tangible, make-you-think change."¹¹⁷ She continued, "I believe it made a lot of people think, people who've never been given those kinds of opportunities to think outside of the Haredi Jewish, Orthodox Jewish box."¹¹⁸ For many of these Jews, the graphic of girls holding Torah scrolls displayed a foreign prohibited concept, and these buses carried this radical idea into their neighborhoods. As a result, this visual challenged traditional ultra-Orthodox gender scripts.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Michele Chabin, "Women of the Wall Launch Bat Mitzvah Ad Campaign in Fight to Read Torah at the Western Wall," *Huffington Post*, October 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/13/womenof-the-wall-bat-mitzvah_n_5979224.html (accessed March 1, 2017).

¹¹⁷ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Despite Women of the Wall representing an Israeli minority—a multi-denominational group of women who believe in pluralism, women’s active participation in public prayer, and who want to pray at the Western Wall—the group has succeeded in making its name and image of feminism well known. Yizhar Hess, the Executive Director of the Masorti (Conservative) movement in Israel, points out that, “the fact that they are such a small minority” and that “most Israelis are not really connected to the world of the Kotel, especially the secular Israelis, in spite of that, everyone in Israel knows the term ‘Women of the Wall’ even if they do not identify with it.”¹¹⁹ Hess specifically notes the immense power of this name by describing the image and ideology it elicits: “The fact that it’s a familiar two words [in Hebrew, *Nashot HaKotel*] is something that speaks for itself because it has all sorts of connotations that come with it;” one of the most distinct images being “a woman with a tallit. You like it. You hate it,” he says. Regardless, “It vents feminism.”¹²⁰ Women of the Wall has sufficiently managed to enter into Israeli social consciousness and generate an accompanying image and ideology. Hess argues that this in itself is a feat. The prayer group has succeeded in becoming part of the social discourse, which plays “a significant role in Jewish feminism in Israel, especially Jewish religious feminism in Israel.”¹²¹ In this way, the prayer group has served as a source of consciousness-raising, continuing the conversation of women’s religious equality in Israel.

¹¹⁹ Transcript of interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 3.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

2) Jewish Women's Empowerment

Women of the Wall has served as a source of Jewish women's empowerment. It may be no surprise that there exists another definition for the concept of *consciousness-raising* that is specifically related to the second-wave of American feminism:

Consciousness-Raising (C-R) is a tool that the Women's Liberation Movement adopted from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, where it was called 'telling it like it is.' In C-R, women answer a question using examples from their personal lives, then the group uses these personal testimonies to draw conclusions about the political root of women's so-called 'personal' problems.¹²²

This type of consciousness-raising was directed inward, as a type of self-empowerment tool. By sharing experiences, this method helped individual women feel that they were not alone in their tribulations and experiences of inequality. They came to understand that women's problems were not 'personal' but rooted in deeper, sociological responses to the changing social scripts.

With respect to Israeli society, in particular, Women of the Wall has been able to serve as a source of women's empowerment, in helping women realize that they are not alone in feeling unaccepted in the religious public sphere. Rabbi Elyse Frishman, an American Reform rabbi, explains that "for the women who are involved in it, I think it absolutely has promoted their sense of right."¹²³ The knowledge of shared experience has been able to generate collective strength, motivating women to take hold of their own

¹²² National Women's Liberation, "Feminist Consciousness-Raising," 2014, <http://www.womensliberation.org/priorities/feminist-consciousness-raising> (accessed March 1, 2017).

¹²³ Transcript of interview with Elyse Frishman, October 18, 2016, p. 4.

Jewish practice within a society that has still not fully accepted women into the religious public sphere. Furthermore, it has motivated women to challenge the prevailing ultra-Orthodox gender norms. Lesley Sachs explains that for her, “Women of the Wall is an issue of empowerment of women and of gender equality. There’s no question that women feel very empowered from joining us. Many Orthodox women say that we are the wind under their wings to do more, to demand more, because we pray halakhically in a women’s prayer group.”¹²⁴ Women of the Wall has been a source of empowerment, supporting women in claiming their equal, religious rights and being advocates for their religious needs. Women of the Wall board member, Rachel Cohen Yeshurun, revealed that “coming from an Orthodox background, the opportunity to not only be a part of a service but to lead one, and at the Kotel no less, is tremendously empowering.”¹²⁵ The prayer group has helped Jewish women recognize that there is a place for their full active participation in the religious public sphere. In addition, as Cohen Yeshurun described, Women of the Wall provides opportunities for women to take hold of their own Jewish practice and observe Judaism in ways that are meaningful to them.

Simply recognizing the spiritual and religious needs of women and the lack of opportunity and support for women to fulfill these needs in Israeli society has been a significant step in rectifying these problems. Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson of the WRN explains that enabling change to occur begins with identifying “specific arenas where there needs to be a *tikkun*, a correction, a reframing.”¹²⁶ This alone will not be the solution, but it will be a significant part. Women of the Wall has been a driving force in

¹²⁴ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Transcript of interview with Rachel Cohen Yeshurun, July 23, 2016, p. 4.

¹²⁶ Transcript of interview with Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, July 27, 2016, p.7.

drawing attention to and addressing women's religious inequalities because it has been about "enfranchising women and enfranchising people who have a broader version and vision of what Judaism should be."¹²⁷

3) Maintaining Women's Religious Space in the Public Sphere

Women's empowerment is only part of the struggle towards achieving gender equality in the religious public sphere. Women of the Wall's struggle has endured for over twenty-five years, and this is due to the persistence of women's religious practice in the public sphere. Through maintaining monthly prayer services and gaining international supporters, Women of the Wall has carved out space for Jewish women to exercise their religious rights in the Israeli public sphere.

Regardless of whether this women's space is accepted by Israeli society, the multi-denominational group has secured this cultural space for the time when women's religious equality becomes a reality. Original Women of the Wall member Shulamit Magnus explains, "I think it's terribly important that Jewish women as a group have a place in Jewish, sacred space, that Judaism be seen in female form and heard in female voice in holy space."¹²⁸ Magnus says that the prayer group's action of *davening* out loud in the women's section at the Kotel is part of "holding the space."¹²⁹ Even if the ultra-Orthodox do not approve of the halakhic prayer of Women of the Wall, the exercising of religious rights is crucial. Magnus rationalizes, "If you don't exercise rights, you lose

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Transcript of interview with Shulamit Magnus, September 4, 2016, p. 20.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

them.”¹³⁰ She feels that the prayer group represents Jewish women as a collective and that it is “holding the place” for their full acceptance in Israel’s religious public sphere.¹³¹ Lesley Sachs explains that in Israel there is a metaphoric phrase, “the salami way,”¹³² used to describe the gradual loss of rights.¹³³ Similar to how a butcher cuts salami slice-by-slice, this metaphor describes a political tactic in which rights are taken away ever so gradually, making the removal nearly unnoticeable until all of the rights are gone. This is what has been happening with religious rights at the Kotel. Sachs recalls that every time the ultra-Orthodox remove equal rights, they have “cut a small piece off.” “It happened very slowly, but [the Kotel has] turned more and more Haredi.” Sachs recounts that

Around 2009, Rabinovitch started building a passageway that was only for Haredi men [to walk] from one side [of the Kotel] to the other, for those who aren’t willing to touch women, and we managed to stop that. So, if we weren’t there, the Kotel wouldn’t even be looking like it [does] today. It’s thanks to us that it’s remained more or less not an ultra-Orthodox synagogue.¹³⁴

Women of the Wall has prevented the complete transformation of the Kotel into an ultra-Orthodox religious space.

This safeguarding of women’s religious space at the Kotel is believed to have a significant effect on issues of women’s religious space in greater Israeli society. Women of the Wall board member Betsy Kallus believes that the exclusion of women in public spaces should be looked at as a choice and that the events at the Kotel are just one part of

¹³⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “Salami tactics” is a metaphor for a type of domination strategy. “Hungary: Salami Tactics,” *Time Magazine*, April 14, 1952, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,857130,00.html> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹³³ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 7.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

this larger issue.¹³⁵ She sees this significant public space as not only “space for prayer and a connection to Judaism” but as a place to defend “civic equality for women.”¹³⁶ She asserts, “I think there’s value in affirming that in the major public gathering space in the state of Israel, the Western Wall, there should be the right for women to be able to express themselves in that space.”¹³⁷ In this way, the unequal treatment of women at the Western Wall becomes a symbol for the tensions caused by no separation of religion and state in Israel’s governmental structure. This larger issue can be realized by observing the gender imbalance within three different types of Israeli settings. During an interview, Women of the Wall Chairwoman Anat Hoffman spoke about the lack of women’s leadership in the Israeli public sphere. She recalled the words of Professor Alice Shalvi,¹³⁸ an Israeli feminist and social activist, who urges women in Israel:

to rule the *beit Knesset* [house of worship], the *Beit Din* [house of law], and the *beit midrash* [house of study]. We need to have women there: *rabbot* [female rabbis], *dayyanot* [female religious court judges], *shoftot* [female civil judges]. We’re in all the secular institutions, why not in the religious ones? It’s the final frontier...!¹³⁹

Women of the Wall’s struggle at the Kotel is a stride towards facilitating women’s entry into the religious, public sphere. The prayer group’s unyielding, multi-denominational religious practice reserves women’s cultural space for the time when Israeli society will

¹³⁵ Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Alice Hildegard Shalvi is an Israeli professor, educator, and feminist. For a full biography see Charlotte Wishlah, “Alice Hildegard Shalvi,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/shalvi-alice> (accessed March 26, 2017).

¹³⁹ Transcript of interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 3.

accept gender equality in the religious public sphere.

Conclusion

Understanding the structure of Israel's governance is necessary for comprehending Women of the Wall's obstacles. Separation of religion and state as well as the ultra-Orthodox supremacy reinforces the exclusion of women in the religious public sphere. Nevertheless, Women of the Wall has buttressed women's empowerment and women's equality in Israeli society through consciousness-raising, providing opportunities for active participation in Jewish practice and holding a women's space in the religious public sphere. Still, Women of the Wall's success in achieving Jewish egalitarianism relies on the approval of Israeli society.

CHAPTER 2: THE MEDIA AND ISRAELI-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Throughout the years, the general Israeli public and the American Jewish community have held differing perspectives on the importance of the Women of the Wall controversy. The following chapter will first discuss these perspectives and the way in which each society's division of religion and state has influenced these viewpoints. It will then reveal how Women of the Wall has used media as a tool for social advocacy to strengthen its cause. The media has played an instrumental role in strengthening the status of Women of the Wall in both Israeli and American society. First, it has put Women of the Wall on the Israeli public agenda. Second, it has served as a way for American Jewry to become invested in Israeli society in a new way. Through the strategic use of media during two key turning points—Anat Hoffman's first arrest in 2010 and her second arrest in 2012—Women of the Wall has been able to gain allies and turn passive followers into active supporters. Lastly, this chapter will explain the significance of WOW's use of media in the development of Israeli-American relations.

Perspectives

Prior to understanding how Women of the Wall has strategically used media to its benefit, one must first understand how Women of the Wall has been perceived by both liberal American Jewry and the general Israeli public. Women of the Wall has often been viewed as a social cause more largely supported by American Jewry than Israeli society.¹⁴⁰ A closer look at liberal Judaism's demographics in America versus Israel can help to explain this perception. In addition, the differing structure of religion and state in each country plays a role in influencing perspectives on Women of the Wall. It is

¹⁴⁰ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, pp. 4–6.

necessary to understand how societal arrangements influence perspectives on this prayer group even before the influence of media.

Reform Judaism is the largest Jewish denomination in the United States.¹⁴¹ A study by the Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” found that “one-third (35%) of all U.S. Jews identify with the Reform movement, while 18% identify with Conservative Judaism, [and] 10% with Orthodox Judaism.”¹⁴² In contrast, in Israel, the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) sector holds the status as the religious authority in issues of religion and state and overpowers the small progressive Jewish voice.¹⁴³ Another survey conducted by Pew Research Center, “Israel’s Religiously Divided Society,” concluded that “The two largest organized Jewish denominations in America – Reform and Conservative Judaism – together have about five times as many U.S. members as the historically much older, more strictly observant Orthodox community. But the Reform and Conservative movements have a far smaller footprint in Israel.”¹⁴⁴ When Israelis were asked if they identify with any of America’s three main streams of Judaism (using Israel’s distinctive terminology to describe its Jewish denominations), only three percent (3%) answered Reform and two percent (2%) Conservative “while half (50%) identify with Orthodoxy – including many Jews who are not highly religiously observant but may

¹⁴¹ Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/> (accessed March 27, 2017).

¹⁴² Ibid. Orthodox Judaism in America is equivalent to Israel’s two informal categories of Jewish religious identity known as Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) and Dati (religious).

¹⁴³ Tamara Zieve and Gil Hoffman, “Large Majority of American-Jews, Israelis Call for End to Orthodox Monopoly in Israel,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Large-majority-of-American-Jews-Israelis-call-for-end-to-Orthodox-monopoly-in-Israel-467664> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁴⁴ Michael Lipka, “Unlike U.S., few Jews in Israel identify as Reform or Conservative,” March 15, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/15/unlike-u-s- few-jews-in-israel-identify-as-reform-or-conservative/> (accessed April 3, 2017).

still be most familiar with Orthodox Judaism. About four in ten Israeli Jews (41%) do not identify with any of these three streams or denominations of Judaism.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the largest practicing stream of Judaism in Israel is Orthodoxy.

In the United States, the separation of religion and state traces its roots to the Constitution. Freedom of religious expression is part of the First Amendment. Lesley Sachs explains that for American Jews, “religious pluralism, religious tolerance is so obvious. When they see a group of women at the Kotel, in the holiest of holiest places and see them being infringed upon or being arrested, it makes their blood boil.”¹⁴⁶ In Israel, where there is no separation of religion and state, “most Israelis are used to an ultra-Orthodox monopoly.”¹⁴⁷ This denominational hierarchy is inherent to the structure of Israeli society. These societal differences set up a great disparity between the ways in which the majority of American Jews and Israelis view the Women of the Wall controversy.

For American Jews, religious freedom is an inalienable right. It is an entitlement that American Jews have persistently and vigorously defended. Betsy Kallus, a Women of the Wall board member since 1991, explains, “For an American Jew who's sitting in a synagogue—a woman who's wearing her tallit—it's unfathomable that women would be arrested for that in this day and age.”¹⁴⁸ However, for many Israeli Jews who are accustomed to the Ultra-Orthodox supremacy, there are more pressing national issues that need to be addressed. These contradictory viewpoints have led to a rift in Israeli-American relations as each side feels its values are not understood. To the Israeli public,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 11.

the Women of the Wall controversy “seems like a side issue; there are so many problems in this country that [it] doesn't seem like one.”¹⁴⁹ Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, the rabbi of Kehilat Kol HaNeshama, a Reform congregation in Jerusalem, notes that the attention Women of the Wall receives can be offensive to Israeli Jews: “It makes most committed Israeli Reform Jews feel that American Jews only care about these symbolic public relations issues and don’t really care about the issues facing Israeli Reform Jews.”¹⁵⁰ Yizhar Hess, the Executive Director of the Masorti Movement in Israel, also explains how the important issues for American Jews are not the most important issues for Israeli Jews:

If I had to choose, to pick and choose my fight, I wouldn't take this fight and put it so dramatically in the forefront. I think that there are way more important things to fight for in Israel in this arena of Jewish pluralism. The fact that there is no civil marriage in Israel and that marriage and divorce needs to be according to the Orthodox interpretation of halakha is a much more discriminatory and bad thing for the Jewish people, for democracy, and for Israel. I would love to see the Israeli thousands or dozens of thousands fighting for it. Strategically, it's more important.¹⁵¹

This is not to say that the struggle for religious pluralism is not significant, but for Israelis, there are other struggles more pressing in the realm of democracy and religious pluralism than that of Women of the Wall. The WOW controversy is just one part of a larger issue in Israeli society: the unequal allocation of power to one stream of Judaism.

¹⁴⁹ Transcript of interview with Shulamit Magnus, September 4, 2016, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ Transcript of interview with Levi Weiman-Kelman, September 18, 2016, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ Transcript of interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 3.

Even WOW Director Lesley Sachs understands that there are many other social justice issues to fight. For most Israelis, “if they go out on the streets on a subject, they’ll go out on things that are more meaningful for them, more relevant to their life. If praying at the Kotel is not relevant to their life, they won’t come and pray with us.”¹⁵² One who chooses not to pray with Women of the Wall may still support its goals of religious pluralism but has found another way to strive for this endeavor. Regardless of whether or not Women of the Wall is an issue of personal importance to most Israeli Jews, there can be little doubt that the cause has captured the attention of American Jewry. Rabbi Weiman-Kelman says that “Women of the Wall is a brilliant cause to galvanize American Jews. Anat Hoffman is really a genius using the Kotel to bring the cause of breaking the Orthodox monopoly to the American Jewish public.”¹⁵³ Hoffman has found a way to motivate American Liberal Jews to engage with Israeli society by means of a social issue that relates to their own understanding of religious expression. As Liberal Judaism makes up the majority of American Jewry, it is understandable that American Jews would support Women of the Wall’s mission for religious equality at the Western Wall, versus in Israel where Orthodoxy is the largest practicing stream of Judaism. Furthermore, it is logical that America’s separation of religion and state would also lead American Jewry to support freedom of religious expression at the Western Wall. Aside from these societal configurations, it is through media that American support has grown against the religious inequality that exists in Israel.

¹⁵² Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁵³ Transcript of interview with Levi Weiman-Kelman, September 18, 2016, p. 3.

First Turning Point: Hoffman Arrest, 2010

On Monday, July 12, 2010, Women of the Wall Chairwoman Anat Hoffman was arrested for holding a Torah scroll. *Ynet*, an Israeli news site, reported that “She [was] suspected of violating a High Court ruling which prohibits women to read the Torah at the holy site.”¹⁵⁴ Following the prayer service, Hoffman was arrested while leading a group from the women’s section of the Kotel to Robinson’s Arch, where they had been granted permission to read from the Torah. The news reported that “during the Morning Prayer, the Torah scroll was in a bag, but the women pulled it out earlier than they were permitted to do so, and began dancing with it at the end of the prayer as they were leaving the Western Wall plaza.”¹⁵⁵ The Jerusalem police brought Hoffman in for questioning and held her for five hours before she was released and ordered to stay away from the Kotel for the next month.¹⁵⁶ The video of this arrest, uploaded that same day, gained national attention, and the Women of the Wall board members realized that this was their opportunity to properly tell their story to the Israeli public.¹⁵⁷

The incident became a turning point for WOW as it prompted the board to seriously evaluate itself and question how it could gain greater awareness within Israeli society. It was then that Shira Pruce was hired to serve as Director of Public Relations.¹⁵⁸ In her words, the board began to ask questions such as “What is holding people back, specifically in Israel, but not only in Israel? What might be holding people back from

¹⁵⁴ Kobi Nahshoni, “Women of Wall Leader Arrested,” *YnetNews*, December 7, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3918484,00.html> (accessed April 2, 2017).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Marcy Oster, “Women of the Wall Head Arrested at Kotel,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.jta.org/2010/07/12/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/women-of-the-wall-head-arrested-at-kotel> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁵⁷ “Anat Gets Arrested,” July 12, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJUbW65itno> (accessed April 2, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Shira Pruce’s full biography can be viewed at <http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/board-and-staff/>.

attending our prayers? or what are some things that we could do to really clarify what it is that we're doing?"¹⁵⁹ The group also began to view its conversations with everyday Israelis as litmus tests to understand the public opinions on WOW.¹⁶⁰ The group even created a Hebrew-language poll for Israelis. The responses gathered described Women of the Wall as "not serious about prayer," "just trying to provoke anger," and even "crazy." People also saw Women of the Wall as solely an American organization. The prayer group had an appearance as being "a fringe, foreign group."¹⁶¹ Lesley Sachs described what she thought were the top three misconceptions about Women of the Wall back in 2010. She explained that people "didn't realize that we were praying halakhically. They didn't realize that we were praying in the women's section. They didn't realize that we'd been doing this for years [since 1988]."¹⁶² This feedback helped Women of the Wall understand how it was perceived by the Israeli public. It was then that the board took very strategic deliberate steps to change those messages.¹⁶³ Sachs explains that the board "put together three main messages that [were added in], at every interview and every press release" to help clear up misconceptions.¹⁶⁴ The group made sure its mission was clear. Pruce asserts that, "what people used to think about Women of the Wall, all of that was changed by the media."¹⁶⁵

One of the first steps the group took was to secure a strong Israeli voice to represent the prayer group and to help ensure that Israeli society would identify WOW as Israeli. Betsy (Batya) Kallus explains that:

¹⁵⁹ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁶³ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 10.

All along Women of the Wall had always been very ‘American.’ We would have board meetings in English when visitors came or [when] we spoke to the group at the Western Wall, we would speak in English, and there wasn't a sense of actually being grounded in Israel, as an Israeli NGO to an Israeli audience.¹⁶⁶

Even more, although the board was and is comprised of all Israelis, about half had made *aliyah* from other countries, which was an obstacle for the group. She recalls that:

In 2010 when all the arrests began [and WOW] began making the news in Israel, all of a sudden the Israeli media was interested in Women of the Wall. You needed to have somebody who could speak Hebrew and speak Israeli, and we realized that. This was actually a discussion in the board and [we made] the decision to hire an Israeli media person, who would essentially shape an Israeli media, public relations outreach strategy for the Israeli public.¹⁶⁷

Shira Pruce was hired in 2010 at the time of the arrests, and Hebrew spokesperson, Oshrat Ben Shimshon, was hired in 2012 after the second wave of WOW arrests.¹⁶⁸ With already a strong American backing of supporters, it was important for WOW to demonstrate to the Israeli public that this issue was one of importance to its fellow Israeli citizens and of relevance to Israeli society. WOW needed to ensure that it was sending a clear message to Israeli citizens.

¹⁶⁶ Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 10.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Email correspondence with Lesley Sachs, “Thesis Question,” March 29, 2017.

The second major step Women of the Wall took came with the timely popularization of social media. Women of the Wall started its first Facebook page, in English, on January 31, 2010. As of January 2017, the Facebook group had 33,223 page followers.¹⁶⁹ In January 2010, WOW also started a Twitter account and in June, created its own YouTube channel. Shira Pruce helped Women of the Wall use these social media outlets effectively. During 2010, the Facebook page “was getting a lot of attention because of Anat's arrest” and because of a powerful video documenting the incident.¹⁷⁰ Women of the Wall's new platform helped the group share its story. Pruce explains that, “in 2010, you were just beginning to see Facebook being used by the masses for social change and for awareness” and not just being used as a “college social tool.”¹⁷¹ With this in mind, the group even used Facebook to initiate its first solidarity campaign in support of Anat Hoffman. Board member Kallus remembers that this period was actually a “technological milestone” and it “totally changed our connections with our constituency—with the Americans and with the Israelis. All of a sudden, everything was available on our Facebook page and our Twitter feed.”¹⁷² These new social media platforms provided access to firsthand accounts of events and helped Women of the Wall become more transparent with its supporters. Lesley Sachs explained just how significant this opportunity was:

The world was a different world than the one we had known many years
beforehand...Social media changed everything for us because we could put

¹⁶⁹ Women of the Wall also created a Facebook page in Hebrew on October 25, 2012, which has 10,939 fans as of January 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 11.

our narrative out, our story. Immediately when Anat was arrested, we had a video cover of it, and we put it up. We managed to get our story out, and it wasn't just the government putting out their version, which is many times not the correct one."¹⁷³

For the first time, Women of the Wall was in control of its own narrative and could tell the story it wanted to tell. It no longer had to rely on the news to give an accurate account of the prayer group's experiences.

In the aftermath of Hoffman's arrest, Women of the Wall also began attracting journalists. The third major step the board took was hiring photojournalists to help Women of the Wall shape its image. As a picture tells a thousand words, Pruce explained that releasing the right photo to the media was crucial. The angles and the lighting all play a part in expressing the intended message:

a group of one-hundred people can look like one-hundred-and-fifty or it can look like ten, depending on how the photographer takes the picture and where he or she is standing. Also, a group of women standing and praying could look like heroes of the early morning with the sun rising behind them or they can look like, I don't know, like *miskenot* [poor, unfortunate women] 'Oh, these poor little women who are out there on their own.' It's all in how you take the picture.¹⁷⁴

There is strategy in media that greatly affects the way viewers will perceive a subject and the feelings that will be provoked. Pruce states that controlling the media has helped ensure that Women of the Wall will be represented in an accurate way; having

¹⁷³ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 3.

¹⁷⁴ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 11.

photojournalists who understand how Women of the Wall sees itself contributes to this accurate representation.

The fundamental lesson the board realized was that it had the power and the resources to shape its own image. As Shira Pruce theorized, “If you don’t say anything and you let [other] people write the story for you, then you might as well not be in the story at all.”¹⁷⁵ The media is already portraying its own side of the story, so being proactive about reporting one’s own standpoint is a prerogative.¹⁷⁶ However, some may question the morality of using media as a tool for social change. To this, Pruce states that, “Being seen is a legitimate tool for social change. I don’t think anyone’s accused a man of just trying to be seen because men are automatically seen and accepted. Women, who struggle in a world full of invisibility and erasure, get accused of wanting to be seen and wanting to be heard. I think that’s a crime.”¹⁷⁷ Others may question the authenticity of prayer with the media present. Pruce responds that while the journalists and visitors’ cameras can be distracting and can make prayer difficult, “the prayer is genuine and you need only to stand there and experience it to know it.”¹⁷⁸ The documentation and media attention does not come without a price, but its benefits have outweighed the costs, helping to shed light upon an issue that has political ramifications.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.



July 12, 2010: Hoffman arrested while embracing Torah scroll.
Credit: Miriam Alster

Second Turning Point: Hoffman Arrest, 2012

The second turning point in the narrative of Women of the Wall that gained media attention and contributed to support occurred on October 16, 2012 with the second dramatic arrest of Anat Hoffman. That evening, the Hadassah Centennial Convention had arranged to join in prayer and song with Women of the Wall at the Kotel. Together in the women's section, Anat Hoffman began by welcoming the Hadassah women and explaining WOWs' mission. Following Hoffman's welcoming words, rabbinical and cantorial students from HUC-JIR in Jerusalem led the attendees in the *Shema*, the prayer of God's oneness with the Jewish people. It was to be a moment of thanksgiving and praise, as Hadassah women stood in support of Women of the Wall. Instead, mid-prayer, a male police officer approached Hoffman and ordered her to lower her voice and wear her *tallit* as a scarf. She lowered her voice but did not cease praying. Evidently, Hoffman's response to the officer's order was insufficient, and she was placed under arrest and escorted from the Kotel plaza.

This time, Hoffman had to spend a night in prison where she experienced mistreatment. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, recalls that

Hoffman “was arrested in a very awful way, put in jail overnight with a car thief and a prostitute, and just treated as if she were some kind of criminal when she was simply exercising her religious and legitimate rights at the Western Wall.”¹⁷⁹ Her arrest became an attempt to equate her with a felon, and a video of this shocked viewers.¹⁸⁰

The video heightened awareness of Women of the Wall, and during the following Rosh Chodesh services, the prayer group was joined by highly esteemed individuals who demonstrated their support for WOW. In February 2013, two of the Israeli paratroopers who liberated the Kotel in 1967 prayed with Women of the Wall, and in the following month, two members of the Knesset joined them in prayer.¹⁸¹ Women of the Wall speaker Cheryl Temkin stated that the video of Hoffman’s arrest was also aired on the Israeli investigative news program *Mabat Sheni* signifying that Women of the Wall had become part of the Israeli dialogue.¹⁸² Rabbi Joshua Weinberg, President of ARZA, explained that “because Anat Hoffman is brilliant, she was able to bring different kinds of Israelis into the source. She brought the Knesset members. She brought the paratroopers who were in the famous picture. She brought lots of different cross sections of Israeli life into the question of the Kotel.”¹⁸³ This was a success as it demonstrated to the Israeli public that Women of the Wall represented an issue larger than that of a group of women striving to pray according to their customs. It signified that the Western Wall had turned into something even its national liberators were ashamed of.

¹⁷⁹ Transcript of interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75wYNtXO6Fo>.

¹⁸¹ Adam Chandler, “The Powerful Alliance between the Women of the Wall and IDF Paratroopers,” *Tablet*, February 11, 2013, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/123895/women-of-the-wall-and-idf-paratroopers-join-ranks> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁸² Transcript of interview with Cheryl Temkin, September 23, 2016, pp. 5–8.

¹⁸³ Transcript of phone interview with Joshua Weinberg, September 2, 2016, p. 5.

The media that was generated from Hoffman's arrest caused a lot of political tension. Rabbi Jacobs stated that this event was "on the front page of not just North American papers, but across the world."¹⁸⁴ Shocked, he questioned, "Is this what the Jewish state wants to be known for?" The morning when Hoffman was released from jail, she called Rabbi Jacobs and Rabbi David Saperstein, who was then serving as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Jacobs and Saperstein agreed that this incident "signaled something really had gone wrong with, frankly, the Zionist dream."¹⁸⁵ The media attention of this arrest, especially in America, placed political pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to not ignore this issue. It prompted him to ask Jewish Agency Chairman, Natan Sharansky, to find a solution to the Women of the Wall controversy.



Joint Women of the Wall – Hadassah event on October 16, 2012 : Hoffman discusses her tallit moments before her arrest. The author of this thesis (standing between Hoffman and the policewoman) was a first-hand witness to this event. Credit: Michal Fattal
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/womenofthewall/8097373205/in/album-72157631792345301/>

¹⁸⁴ Transcript of interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

Successful Media Outcomes

The use of media had its most significant influence on Israeli society by placing Women of the Wall on the public agenda. In contrast to the discussion in the United States where the issue is salient to elements of the liberal Jewish community, in Israel, it is a social issue, and citizens from all backgrounds hold an opinion that is influenced by the media. WOW Director Lesley Sachs offers examples of the many Israeli perceptions that exist:

Nowadays many Israelis see us as heroes in many ways, as a group of strong, brave women who are fighting against the ultra-Orthodox monopoly. Then there's another group that believes in religious pluralism, and they are also supporters of ours. Of course, there are others. There are those that don't understand why we're doing what we're doing, and there are those that think we shouldn't be doing it. No one is *adish* [שׂוֹנֵא]. No one is *indifferent*.¹⁸⁶

Whether an Israeli agrees or disagrees with Women of the Wall's mission, the prayer group is now recognized. More importantly, being on the public agenda led to positive developments for Women of the Wall:

[It] got us on the public agenda, whether in the Knesset, on Bibi's table, into the room for negotiations for a third section of the Kotel, etc. It changed the way in which people thought about us and talked about us—maybe still not with your day-to-day Israeli in the *shuk*—but I definitely think amongst leadership and decision makers, and that's

¹⁸⁶ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 5.

important.¹⁸⁷

Women of the Wall used media as a means to enter the Israeli public agenda and social discourse to the point where it could no longer be disregarded by Israel's political leaders.

The use of media had its most significant influence on American society by allowing American Jewry to become invested in Israeli society in a new way. The live streaming of Women of the Wall's Rosh Chodesh services along with its live Twitter posts allowed supporters to gain a real-time experience with the group from anywhere around the world. In addition, Shira Pruce explained that in response to the Women of the Wall controversy, this was "the first time that we see a widespread ability amongst American Jews to criticize Israel in a way that they feel good about."¹⁸⁸ American Jews posted their feelings on social media, wrote blog posts and op-eds, and rabbis preached about this issue from the pulpit. Through interactive Facebook campaigns, American Jews were constantly being engaged. Women of the Wall wanted to show American Jews that this issue would only succeed through a partnership. The prayer group portrayed messages that told supporters, "We need your voice. We need you to lobby your representatives, your embassies. We need you to speak out on our behalf while we're getting arrested because our voices are stronger together."¹⁸⁹ Through the media, American Jews found ways to become personally invested in Women of the Wall and the prayer group was able to create a long-distance partnership that could influence Israeli society. Yizhar Hess indicated that Hoffman's arrests had a profound impact on

¹⁸⁷ Transcript of interview with Shira Pruce, August 28, 2016, p. 10.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

American society: [They] “created the political pressure on the prime minister and on the leadership of Israel,” and, “pushed the process that forced us all to start very serious negotiations.”¹⁹⁰

Towards Mutual Support

Lastly, this chapter will explore one of Women of the Wall’s greatest achievements from the strategic use of media: the established partnership between Israeli and American Jewry. Anat Hoffman states, “I’m proud that we were able to break the partition between us and diaspora Jews. We have sisters abroad that are part of us, that’s a partition that’s hard to break.”¹⁹¹ For many Americans, the media has served as a means of engagement with Israel. However, the social issues in Israel that are important to Americans Jews are not always the same social issues important to Israelis. A discussion of how this overseas relationship can best support each partner’s aims, moving toward mutual support, will follow.

Women of the Wall has realized that for many American Jews, social media serves as a means of engagement with Israeli society. In *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel*, political scientist, Dov Waxman, explains that for many American Jews who struggle with Israel’s policies, instead of becoming estranged from Israel, they take action. Many of these Jews move to “critical engagement” and “these American Jews actually care *very deeply* about Israel, and wish only to save it

¹⁹⁰ Transcript of interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 4.

¹⁹¹ Transcript of interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 8.

from itself.”¹⁹² Still, the question remains whether American Jews should learn only to care about what is significant to Israeli Jews and to what extent should Israeli Jews care about the preferences of American Jewry? Rabbi Elyse Frishman, the senior rabbi of a Reform congregation in New Jersey, specifies that, “Israel is not just a state for the citizens who live there. Israel is meant for the Jewish people.”¹⁹³ Furthermore, the “role as non-resident Jew is in fact very, very important” and may explain “why this issue is so important in an exemplary way” for American Jews.¹⁹⁴ Israel must learn that its decision to be inclusive of liberal Jews indicates the level of worth it ascribes to American Jewry, a population in which liberal Jews form the majority. Israel must learn that its decision indicates whether the country sees itself as a homeland for Israelis or a homeland for the Jewish people; a homeland for ultra-Orthodox Jews or a homeland for all Jews.

Prime Minister Netanyahu may be aware of the importance of this overseas relationship, but how far is he willing to go in creating a society of Jewish pluralism?

Rabbi Rick Jacobs expresses that:

People always ask if Netanyahu is sympathetic to this cause [of Women of the Wall]? I think on some level he might be, but I think the real thing that drove him then and continues to drive him, is that he sees this as a strategic challenge to the state of Israel. If this confrontation continues on a monthly basis, or now it’s become even more regular than a monthly confrontation, it’s easy to weaken the bonds between the US and Israel at

¹⁹² Elliot Abrams, “If American Jews and Israel Are Drifting Apart, What’s the Reason?” *Mosaic*, April 4, 2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2016/04/if-american-jews-and-israel-are-drifting-apart-whats-the-reason/> (accessed April 3, 2017).

¹⁹³ Transcript of interview with Elyse Frishman, October 18, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

a time when those bonds are very, very important for other strategic issues, whether it's military assistance or for issues of global security.¹⁹⁵

Israel's decisions in the arena of Jewish pluralism have a consequential effect on American Jewry, but the issue of Women of the Wall may not be strong enough to bring about change. Yizhar Hess argues that just because the specific issue of Women of the Wall may not have captured Israeli Jews in the same way it has for American Jews, "doesn't mean it's not important for Israeli society. At the end of the day, if we win this battle, I think it will dramatically affect Israeli society."¹⁹⁶ There just may be other issues in the realm of Jewish pluralism that help to bring about these civil rights. Still, mutual support is necessary for any real change to occur in Israeli society. As for Women of the Wall, board member Rachel Cohen Yeshurun says that there does exist "a symbiosis. Women of the Wall needs American political pressure and monetary support. American Jewry needs Women of the Wall as the foot soldiers on the ground. Women of the Wall is a way for Americans to express both their frustration with and love for Israel."¹⁹⁷ Until Israel understands the importance of this mutual support for the creation of a more democratic Jewish state, American Jews must continue to love Israel, even with its flaws. However, how long can liberal American Jews maintain their overseas support before giving up on their homeland altogether?

Conclusion

This chapter has described the different perspectives that American and Israeli Jews

¹⁹⁵ Transcript of interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Transcript of interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 5.

¹⁹⁷ Transcript of interview with Rachel Cohen Yeshurun, July 23, 2016, p. 2.

bring to their understanding of the Women of the Wall controversy. It has discussed how the prayer group has strategically used media as a tool for social advocacy within Israeli and American society and the outcomes it has produced. Media has helped Women of the Wall enter into Israel's social discourse and gain a place on the Israeli public agenda. Furthermore, with the use of live streaming and online campaigns, media has served as a means for American Jews to become active in their engagement with Israel and active supporters of Women of the Wall. With the understanding that both American Jewry and Israeli Jewry need one another, media can serve as the link for providing mutual support and both societies can strengthen what is called the homeland for the *entire* Jewish people.

CHAPTER 3: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

One point of contention that comes into play over the Women of the Wall controversy has to do with whether or not it is an indigenous movement that pertains to Israeli reality or whether it is largely an irrelevant issue being foisted upon Israelis by American Jews. The argument that Women of the Wall is a foreign import has been used to diminish the importance of WOW's fight for women's equality and Jewish religious pluralism for the state of Israel. Considering Women of the Wall's mission as a struggle for feminism and religious pluralism in Israel, this chapter will explore whether these social values are natural to Israeli society or are American imports. This chapter will also consider whether these concepts are realistic goals for Israel, specifically in a country where ultra-Orthodox Judaism is so embedded in the structure of the state. Finally, this chapter will explore the main barrier to Women of the Wall achieving greater democracy in Israel: no separation of religion and state.

The Argument of Authenticity

The argument that Women of the Wall is an American import is one that can be referred to as an "argument of authenticity."¹⁹⁸ It is an argument that is used by those in opposition to Women of the Wall in order to undermine its existence. The argument attempts to reason that if Women of the Wall is a group comprised of Americans then it does not belong in Israeli society. It also suggests that if the prayer group's social values of feminism and religious pluralism are not *authentic* to Israeli society then the group's objectives are not congruent with what Israelis want for their society. The term "authentic" can be used either in the sense of being "of undisputed origin or authorship,"

¹⁹⁸ Phrase coined by author.

or of being...a “reliable, accurate representation.”¹⁹⁹ Those who want to weaken Women of the Wall’s power will argue that the group’s values do not represent the desires of Israeli society. Renee Ghert-Zand, reporter and feature writer for *The Times of Israel*, states that, “Many Israelis dismiss Women of the Wall as foreign interlopers.”²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the 2014 *American Jewish Year Book* states that, “WOW is sometimes misunderstood or disparaged by both secular and religious Israelis as a foreign import.”²⁰¹ Ronit Peskin, the leader of Women *For* the Wall (W4W), an opposition group to Women of the Wall, explains that her group has “been claiming that Women of the Wall and their supporters are Americans that are trying to shove their liberal American agenda vis-à-vis the Kotel on Israelis that aren’t interested.”²⁰² Shmuel Rosner, senior fellow at the Jewish People Institute and *L.A. Jewish Journal* columnist, agrees that, “The whole battle for the Western Wall is an Americanized and American-imported battle for religious moderation and tolerance.”²⁰³ However, even if these social values are imports, they can still benefit Israeli society. Rosner clarifies that, “Women wearing a tallit is not something Israelis are used to. They don’t necessarily have negative feelings about it, but it’s just strange and feels like it doesn’t belong here.”²⁰⁴ The underlying question is if social values that have not originated in Israel can still be constructive to Israeli society.

¹⁹⁹ Varga Somogy and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authenticity/>, (accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁰⁰ Renee Ghert-Zand, “Where ‘rock star’ Anat Hoffman turns raging feminist,” *The Times of Israel*, April 20, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/where-rock-star-anat-hoffman-turns-raging-feminist/> (accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁰¹ Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin, “Gender in American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Year Book* 2014 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 121.

²⁰² Ronit Peskin, “What People Really Are Thinking About Women of the Wall on the Streets of Jerusalem,” May 5, 2013, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/what-people-really-are-thinking-about-women-of-the-wall-on-the-streets-of-jerusalem/> (accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁰³ Ghert-Zand, “Where ‘rock star’ Anat Hoffman turns raging feminist.”

Women of the Wall's leadership views the character of the prayer group and the social values it represents in two different ways. First, Women of the Wall understands that Israel is a culture of imports and believes both feminism and religious pluralism have been strengthened in Israel by American Jews. Second, the prayer group sees itself as addressing religious desires and needs that have evolved with modernity. These two viewpoints of Women of the Wall will be further explained by its leaders Anat Hoffman and Lesley Sachs as well as by WOW board members and supporters. An analysis of possible responses to this argument of authenticity can help to determine the importance and validity of the question: must social justice concerns have local salience in order to be valid?

WOW's Social Values: Religious Pluralism and Feminism

Two of Women of the Wall's most important social values and objectives for the Western Wall are religious pluralism and feminism.²⁰⁵ This chapter will analyze these two concepts and discuss whether Women of the Wall's objectives are American imports, part of modernity, or inherent to Judaism.

In his book, *Deep Religious Pluralism*, David Ray Griffin distinguishes between "religious diversity" and "religious pluralism" in the following way:

whereas 'religious diversity' refers to the simple sociological fact that there are many religious traditions, often within a single country, 'religious pluralism' refers to beliefs and attitudes. Religious pluralists do not believe that their own religion is the only legitimate one. They believe

²⁰⁵ Women of the Wall, "Grassroots Rebellion," March 30, 2015, <http://us1.campaign-archive1.com/?u=1998ef3f0f337064ca67a8d7e&id=7fe6fd936b&e=9f9edf6695> (accessed April 24, 2017).

that other religions can provide positive values and truths, even salvation—however defined—to their adherents.²⁰⁶

Although the term ‘religious pluralism’ may be used, this chapter will primarily speak about *Jewish* religious pluralism, in particular—the conviction that there is more than one legitimate way to be Jewish. Second, as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary*, “feminism” is “the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.” As described in its newsletters, Women of the Wall states that it seeks to “fight for women’s rights and Jewish pluralism at the Western Wall.”²⁰⁷ Achieving these social goals at the Western Wall is central to its mission.

Culture of Imports

Israel has always been an amalgam of diverse cultures, each adding its own social values and customs to the fabric of Israeli life. In fact, some of the most influential concepts, creations, and people did not originate with the State at all. There is no denying that Women of the Wall was started by a group of women from America attending the American Jewish Congress’s first International Conference on the Empowerment of Jewish Women in Jerusalem. However, today, Women of the Wall is led by both native Israelis and those who have made *aliyah*. As a non-profit organization, Women of the Wall’s constituents live all over the world. To be a WOW supporter one needs only to attend a WOW Rosh Chodesh service at the Western Wall, virtually attend through WOW’s live streaming, hold a Rosh Chodesh service abroad in solidarity, participate in a

²⁰⁶ David Ray Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xiii.

²⁰⁷ Women of the Wall, “Grassroots Rebellion.”

WOW campaign, or make a donation. The prayer group has always seen its overseas supporters as partners in achieving its goals: “Our supporters around the world make the ongoing struggle for the Western Wall possible!”²⁰⁸ In addition to relying on American monetary support, Women of the Wall relies on American Jews to transmit their democratic social values to Israel. In a recent press release, Women of the Wall wrote that, “It is incumbent upon Israel’s true friends to safeguard the state’s democratic values alongside its borders. We are partners in the values of equality, tolerance, pluralism that are enshrined in the American Bill of Rights.”²⁰⁹ Women of the Wall recognizes that American Jews help to strengthen the social values of feminism and religious pluralism in Israel and do not see this borrowing or importing of principles as a negative action.

One may be surprised to learn which initiatives have come from America versus which ones are indigenous to Israel. Yizhar Hess, the Executive Director of the Masorti movement in Israel, believes that these questions of “what’s authentic or what’s not authentic, what’s Israeli or what’s not Israeli” are the wrong ones to be asking.²¹⁰ He reminds us that the very notion that led to the Jewish nation that is now Israel, Zionism, was not even established in Israel: “Zionism is a revolution that came from Europe with Theodor Herzl; should we question if it is less authentic?”²¹¹ Hess offers that as far as distinguished Jewish literary works, “many think that the discourse in the Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud²¹²) is more rich in some ways than the Talmud Yerushalmi

²⁰⁸ Women of the Wall, “What Don’t We Talk About When We Talk About Israel’s Security?” March 27, 2017, <http://us1.campaign-archive2.com/?u=1998ef3f0f337064ca67a8d7e&id=de1eb0a027&e=9f9edf6695> (accessed May 3, 2017).

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 10.

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

²¹² The Talmud is a literary compendium of Jewish halakhic debates that serves as a resource for religious practice.

(Jerusalem Talmud).”²¹³ This is to say that ideas which do not originate in Israel can be just as significant as ideas that are native to Israel. Still, aside from ideas and inventions, Israel’s citizens are what truly highlight its diversity:

There were 600,000 Jews in 1948. Decades later, we are 6 million and it's due to the fact that many people immigrated to Israel and brought their tradition. Moroccan Jews brought their tradition and Iraqi Jews brought their tradition. American Jews brought their tradition. It's not less authentic. This is how it happens. This is how it happened in any country of immigrants. We are a country of immigrants.²¹⁴

People immigrate and bring with them new ideas. Hess concludes that this is both a natural and wonderful phenomenon.²¹⁵

On the other hand, there are many native phenomena that have been detrimental to Israel. As Anat Hoffman argues,

Some people say if it didn’t evolve naturally in Israel, that it may not be natural for the environment. Well, let’s look at some of the things that naturally evolved in Israel. How about Jewish racism that naturally evolved here? God help us, [from] some of the terrible aberrations that grew here.²¹⁶

Some of the best of Israeli society originated from abroad, while some of the worst began right in the land of Israel itself.

As far as the social values of feminism and religious pluralism that are evident

²¹³ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 10.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Transcript of interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 4.

through WOW's multi-denominational prayer group, these values are indeed intrinsic to liberal American Judaism. Betsy Kallus, a Women of the Wall board member originally from Massachusetts who made *aliyah* to Israel in 1991, expresses that she is proud of the liberal moral values that American Judaism has imparted to Israel: "American Judaism is very strongly pluralistic Judaism, and very much influenced by feminism and by feminist understandings of inclusion and equality. So, I don't have any problem with people saying it's an import; I'm actually kind of proud of that."²¹⁷ For Kallus, ethical values are constructive values, no matter where they have originated. Women of the Wall's fight for feminism and religious pluralism should not be devalued for using American democratic social values.

Culture of Modernity

In addition to Women of the Wall viewing itself as a prayer group that embraces and borrows democratic social values, WOW also sees itself as addressing the religious needs of modernity. WOW believes that feminism and religious pluralism are not solely imports but also principles of equal rights. These social values are understood to be societal developments characteristic of life's natural progression. Additionally, pluralism has been an essential tenet of Judaism long before the twenty-first century. With these perspectives, feminism and religious pluralism are not values borrowed from other cultures, but values that are central to larger sociological structures.

Women of the Wall has been striving for what is called the "local custom" at the Western Wall to include Jewish pluralistic customs. WOW has recognized and

²¹⁷ Transcript of interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 13.

responded to a growing desire for women's religious equality and religious pluralism in Israel and has been hoping Israel's government will follow its example of changing with the times. During a 1994 Women of the Wall case, Israeli Supreme Court Justice Shlomo Levin wrote, "As I see it, the phrase 'local custom' should not necessarily be interpreted according to Jewish law or according to the *status quo*. The nature of a custom is that it changes according to the changing times."²¹⁸ Women of Wall believes its social values stem from the needs of its prayer group but are also reinforced by the democratic values of American Jews.

Modern needs have greatly dictated the objectives of Women of the Wall. Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson believes that feminism is a "manifestation of modernity. In the modern age we see a broadening of the availability of options for women."²¹⁹ Shelley Budgeon, in her book, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity*, explains that "feminist ideals of autonomy, choice, and self-determination have become key, normative features of 'modernized' femininity, and women are encouraged to internalize these values not as 'feminists' but as liberated individuals."²²⁰ Looking back at modernity's effects on the liberation of women, one can see that feminism in Israel is not an import, but a result of contemporary society in Westernized countries. Hence, the demand for equality by Women of the Wall can be viewed as a sign of the time.

Similar to the effects modernity has had on gender norms, Judaism has continually evolved with the times in the areas of liturgy, theology, and religious practice.

²¹⁸ Appeal by the State of Israel 23834-04-13 State of Israel v. Ras et al.

²¹⁹ Transcript of Skype interview with Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, July 27, 2016, p. 13.

²²⁰ Shelley Budgeon, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.

Lesley Sachs offers the example of the *siddur*, the Jewish prayerbook, as an area of noticeable change:

A rabbi was talking the other day about the siddur on a Friday night, and the fact that it was only in the 16th century in Sfat [Israel] that the siddur became more of what it is today. Kabbalat Shabbat was completely different before. So there are changes all the time, and there are always those who oppose change. Change nowadays, of course, involves gender equality, but change in the past involved other things.²²¹

Judaism has made changes based on evolving ideology and theological issues. Gender equality is just another change based on evolving societal norms.

Nevertheless, with modernity's effects on society, one may question why Israel is slow to progress in the area of women's religious rights. Rabbi Joshua Weinberg, the President of ARZA, suggests an answer:

I think Israelis were feminists for years. Now that we're all watching Hillary Clinton, [Israel remembers] we had a woman Prime Minister [Golda Meir] almost forty-three years ago. I think the notion of egalitarianism was central to the Zionist Socialist ethos of one hundred years ago. What's foreign to them [Israel's government] is that that could be also applicable in the religious sphere as well.²²²

With no separation of religion and state, Israel's idea of egalitarianism has become lost, buried by patriarchal ultra-Orthodoxy. An article by Noa Levanon Klein entitled "Are We There Yet?" published in the *Israel Institute Magazine*, analyzes gender in Israel and

²²¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 10.

²²² Transcript of phone interview with Joshua Weinberg, September 2, 2016, p. 4.

this unique sociological lag. Klein writes that, “From the images of gun-wielding women soldiers to the legacy of one of the first female heads of government, Israel has created the impression of being ahead of the world on gender equality. To this day, there is a gap between the idealistic vision of gender equality and the realities facing women.”²²³

Unfortunately, modernity has not been able to break the barrier of Israel’s theocracy. We see that “advancements for women [are] accompanied by legal, religious, and cultural crosscurrents reinforcing traditional gender roles,” as evidenced in the Women of the Wall controversy.²²⁴

Comparable to the actualization of feminism which has been thwarted by the union of religion and state, religious pluralism has yet to be achieved in Israel. Rabbi Rick Jacobs does not view religious pluralism as an American import exclusive to liberal Jews, but understands it as a central tenet of Judaism:

It’s the fundamental of Judaism. It’s the Talmud. The Talmud is a pluralistic document, intellectually, morally, and theologically. If you read [David Hartman’s] book, *A Heart of Many Rooms*, he argues persuasively that the fundamental mindset in Judaism is for pluralism—not necessarily that there’s uniform agreement, but that there’s multiple views on halakhic issues, theological, liturgical...²²⁵

In this example, Jacobs uses the Talmud to describe how one Jewish text is composed of many different commentaries. This text, a compilation of rabbinic debates and teachings, edited in literary layers, dates back to as early as the first century. Therefore, pluralism

²²³ Noa Levanon Klein, “Are We There Yet?” *Israel Institute Magazine: Gender in Israel*, 2016, http://www.israelinstitute.org/sites/default/files/II_Mag_Sp16_SP.pdf (accessed May 3, 2017).

²²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²²⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 11.

has been integral to Jewish culture for centuries. Today, however, the concept of pluralism is being desired and realized in a new way. While there has already been the acceptance of a diverse spectrum of literary opinions, the acceptance of a diverse spectrum of religious practice has yet to be achieved. Rabbi Jacobs asserts, “I refuse to believe that pluralism is some American creation. I think it is authentic Jewish tradition, which has been, I think, in very ugly ways, uprooted and frankly undermined by a political structure in Israel.”²²⁶ Women of the Wall’s endeavor for greater Jewish religious pluralism is testing Israel’s structure of religion and state.

Choosing Democracy

Whether feminism and religious pluralism are American imports, effects of modernity, or engrained in Judaism itself, what matters is that Women of the Wall has chosen to reinforce democratic principles within Israeli society. Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke at the American Israel Political Action Committee’s (AIPAC) annual Policy Conference about the physical security of Israel’s borders. In a Women of the Wall press release, Anat Hoffman responded that:

The problem with this predictable speech is that it neglects to mention the dangers lurking within Israel, threatening its democracy and eating away at the bedrock of values that has always been the basis of the US-Israel relationship. It is incumbent upon Israel’s true friends to safeguard the state’s democratic values alongside its borders.²²⁷

Women of the Wall sees its partnership with American Jews as one that can not only help

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Women of the Wall, “What Don’t We Talk About When We Talk About Israel’s Security?”

generate a more democratic Western Wall but can also help to create a more democratic Israeli society. “We are living in a time of change,” says Rabbi Alona Lisitsa, the first woman rabbi to successfully join a local Israeli religious council (Lisitsa is a Reform rabbi who sits on council in Mevasseret Zion). “At last the Israeli society has understood that what Women of the Wall is doing is important for our democracy.”²²⁸ Similarly, Rabbi Jackie Ellenson does not see Women of the Wall as a social cause exclusively for women or Americans, but for a greater purpose. According to her, gender equality is not

an American import. [It’s] just a value—a core human value—that all people are equal and have equal rights to equal access. Feminism, I can’t say that’s an American import. That impacts everyone all over the world. When I hear that line as a way to kind of discredit Women of the Wall, ‘Oh, all the women are really American and they’re just bringing in these American ideas,’—they’re not American ideas, they’re actually human values. Women’s rights are human rights.²²⁹

This is why Women of the Wall’s objective is important for more than just those who attend each Rosh Chodesh service. Women of the Wall is striving to demonstrate to Israel that its political structure is impinging upon the human rights of its citizens.

Cheryl Birkner Mack, formally with WOW and now with the Original-Women of the Wall prayer group,²³⁰ sees Israel’s relationship with American Jews as one that is working to strengthen the democracy of Israeli society:

If one of the North American contributions can be women’s fair rights,

²²⁸ Ghert-Zand, “Where ‘rock star’ Anat Hoffman Turns Raging Feminist.”

²²⁹ Transcript of Skype interview with Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, July 27, 2016, p. 13.

²³⁰ The Original Women of the Wall will be discussed more in Chapter 4.

why not? I think it's a great contribution to democracy, and actually not only democracy but to religion: to expand the world both in Israel and outside of Israel from thinking that the Haredim are the only viable forms of Judaism or that the Rabbanut is the only way of seeing Judaism. There are lots of faces to Judaism, all respected and all honored.²³¹

Mack rationalizes that what is important is not *where* moral principles stem from, but *what* influences they can have on a discriminatory Israeli society and on Jewish pluralism.

Increasingly, Israelis are beginning to understand that the Women of the Wall controversy represents more than just a group of women who prefer to pray according to their customs. It symbolizes the procurement of equal rights beyond the Western Wall. Elana Sztokman, Executive Director of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, believes that “Women of the Wall has spurred Israelis to understand the need to protect civil rights and fight against the conflation of government power and radical religion in all aspects of daily life.”²³² This may include personal status changes such as marriage and divorce or even transportation on Shabbat—all areas of civil life that are affected by ultra-Orthodox rule in Israel. Greater democracy in Israel is not just the desire of Women of the Wall or American Jews. A recent study found that both Israel and America are in favor of following democratic values over Jewish law when it comes to decision-making. In March 2016, in a comprehensive study of religion in Israel, the Pew Research Center found that 62 percent of Israeli Jews agreed that democratic principles should be given

²³¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 17.

²³² Ghert-Zand, “Where ‘rock star’ Anat Hoffman Turns Raging Feminist.”

preference over religious law if there is a contradiction between the two.²³³ On a similar note, in September 2016, “a poll conducted by *The Jerusalem Post* and the American Jewish Committee found that 74 percent of American Jews and 62 percent of Israeli Jews believe the non-Orthodox rites should be recognized.”²³⁴ This demonstrates that a democratic Israel is favored over one that solely features ultra-Orthodox religious law in the fabric of Israeli life. With the knowledge that both countries support the value of democracy over halakha, American and Israeli Jews can feel content working towards a more pluralistic Israel.

Women of the Wall proponents maintain that the “argument for authenticity” is an invalid claim used to delegitimize the organization’s endeavors. It is a way to undermine the prayer group’s efforts of bringing civil rights into the forefront of Israeli society and out from the shadow of ultra-Orthodox Jewish law. It is a way to challenge the actualization of democracy in a society with no separation of religion and state.

The Tension between National and Religious Sentiments

As a noteworthy site for the state of Israel, both as historic place for commemorating Israel’s liberation and as a place of prayer, the Western Wall holds a tension of having both national and religious significance. In 1967, with the victory of the Six Day War, Israeli paratroopers captured the Western Wall as a national site. However,

²³³ Pew Research Center, “Israel’s Religiously Divided Society,” March 8, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/?utm_source=AdaptiveMailer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=16-10-13%20Israel%20Mini-Documentary&org=982&lvl=100&ite=407&lea=64620&ctr=0&par=1&trk= (accessed May 3, 2017).

²³⁴ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “Poll: Most Israeli and American Jews Want Israel to Recognize Non-Orthodox Marriages, Conversions,” September 14, 2016, <http://www.jta.org/2016/09/14/news-opinion/united-states/poll-most-israeli-and-american-jews-want-israel-to-recognize-non-orthodox-marriages-conversions> (accessed May 3, 2017).

shortly afterwards the status of the Wall began to change. Yizhar Hess expresses that, “It’s a mistake what Israel did after 1967 when the government gave the powers to the Minister of Religion and not to the Minister of Education or the Minister of Tourism, but it happened, and ever since then, we [liberal Jews] are paying the price.”²³⁵ Today, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, an ultra-Orthodox authority, governs the Western Wall. For this reason, the Kotel is conducted as an ultra-Orthodox religious site instead of as a national site commemorating Israel’s victory of independence and thus, it does not exemplify democratic values. Women of the Wall believes that, “The way we handle the place that is most sacred to us is a microcosm of our values as a whole. It is high time we talk about equality, tolerance and pluralism as crucial parts of the security of the State of Israel.”²³⁶ Until these democratic values are enforced at the Western Wall, a site which once represented Israel’s freedom, it will continue to reflect the inequalities caused by a country with no separation of religion and state.

This clash between national and religious sentiments can be a harsh experience for Israelis. The perspective of Women of the Wall male supporter, Yuval Newman, represents those Israelis who believe the Kotel should have remained a national site instead of a religious one. He recalls that one of his most negative powerful experiences at the Western Wall was hearing the “shaming whistles [of the ultra-Orthodox] while the women sang the national anthem.”²³⁷ Women of the Wall sang something that is not religious and as an anthem would tend to evoke mutual feelings of patriotism, but the Ultra-Orthodox Jews still saw it as a problem and were against it. For Newman, this was

²³⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 5.

²³⁶ Women of the Wall, “What Don’t We Talk About When We Talk About Israel’s Security?”

²³⁷ Written interview with Yuval Newman, August 20, 2016, p. 1.

an emotional experience of the social gap that exists.²³⁸ It underscored the divergence between religious aspirations and national aspirations for the state of Israel. While Newman does not “see any sense in praying *to* a wall,”²³⁹ he perceives the Kotel as a “place that is so central for the Jewish people, that it be a place for everyone.”²⁴⁰ He describes the site from the point of view as a *Hiloni* (secular Jew) using the Hebrew term ‘*kir*’ that means “any wall” instead of ‘*HaKotel*,’ the Hebrew phrase used for the ‘Western Wall.’ He also specifies that the site is “central” to the Jewish people, instead of using the religious term “sacred.” Therefore, in Newman’s eyes, he perceives the Western Wall as a national site for all the Jews in the world, which is why he supports the equal rights for all who visit it.²⁴¹

Newman’s perspective highlights the stark reality of the way the Haredi establishment envisions Israeli society versus the way secular Jews envision it. His account of the ultra-Orthodox Jews cancelling out the sound of “Hatikvah,” Israel’s national anthem, demonstrates the depreciation of national sentiments that can come from no separation of religion and state. This is an issue that can have powerful ramifications for the future of Israel’s democracy.

Religious Pluralism: A Realistic Goal?

Women of the Wall is a test of religious pluralism in Israel. It is a test of the value of *klal Yisrael*—the Jewish collective—in a country where only one way of being Jewish has been fashioned into the political structure and given privileges over others. Is Jewish

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ “Wall” is spelled “קיר” in original Hebrew transcript.

²⁴⁰ Written interview with Yuval Newman, August 20, 2016, p. 1.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

pluralism a realistic goal for Israel's theocracy? A look at the perspectives of some of the key players and supporters in the Women of the Wall controversy may provide some answers.

Director of Women of the Wall, Lesley Sachs, believes that “a measure of religious pluralism” can be obtained in Israeli society.²⁴² Sachs perceives the Israeli public opinion on current events as a reflection of Israeli society's readiness for greater religious pluralism. Such social issues that Israelis have been disturbed about include the fact that the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate oversees personal status changes and the dispute over whether public transportation should be allowed on Shabbat. In regards to Jewish pluralism, Sachs says, “I think that we can get further; we can aspire for more. The fact that more and more Israelis do not get married through the Rabbinate is an indication. I think Israelis want it [pluralism]. The issue at the moment of the train and public transportation is a complete breaking of the Status Quo.”²⁴³ The Status Quo Agreement in Israel attempts to maintain an ethical balance between religion and state in a primarily secular society so the forcing of ultra-Orthodox guidelines on everyone would violate this agreement.

What Women of the Wall and its supporters understand is that the controversy at the Kotel is a symptom of a larger issue—no separation of religion and state—which has created a society that does not foster Jewish pluralism. Women of the Wall board member Betsy Kallus describes how she is:

...very despairing about the possibility for pluralism in Israel having a strong foothold, because as long as the Haredim have political power and

²⁴² Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 9.

²⁴³ Ibid.

access to huge governmental budgets, they're just going to protect themselves...They see the Reform and Conservative as stepping onto their terrain,...so they will do everything they can to incite against Reform and Conservative and create a public discourse against Jewish pluralism.²⁴⁴

To the ultra-Orthodox, the liberal denominations are a threat to their identity and political status that if lost would cost them tons of money. Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, Ph.D., the National Director of Recruitment and Admissions at HUC-JIR states:

I think it would be tragic if the Kotel continues to be this place of such conflict, and screaming, and yelling, and violence...I think it's tragic, but I think it's a symptom. I don't think it's the problem itself. I think it's a symptom of how much we're not unified. We're not part of the same Jewish story in fact. I think liberal Jewry will have to be bold. We'll have to work on the educational, relational side and on the political side.²⁴⁵

The question of religious pluralism is magnified at the Western Wall because a threat to each denomination's social identity is apparent at the site. Nevertheless, the Women of the Wall controversy is a symptom of the Jewish denominational discord that is reinforced by the unequal political structure.

Religious pluralism in Israel would require the acceptance of a society in which each Jewish denomination could adhere to its own beliefs while having regard for others. The Western Wall's interdenominational conflict is similar to that of the intercultural conflict described in John Ungerleider's chapter, "Conflict," in *Theory and Practice of Multicultural Teams*. The chapter sheds light on the Western Wall confrontations stating

²⁴⁴ Transcript of Skype interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 13.

²⁴⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, August 1, 2016, p. 10.

that, “culture can be viewed as a unique combination of values, behavioral norms, and symbols, or alternately, perceptions, practices, and products. Myriad factors make members of two distinct cultures either compatible or likely to clash” as with the varying, denominational views on women’s religious practice in Judaism.²⁴⁶ Specifically, Ungerleider would consider this type of conflict an “identity issue” with each denomination feeling threatened. He teaches that “Social identity differences need not disappear in order to eliminate conflict; rather, successful conflict management strategies work with those identities and capitalize on recognition of real diversity.”²⁴⁷ However, Ungerleider’s solution is easier to suggest than implement. Rabbi Joshua Weinberg, who was ordained from HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, feels that:

The Haredim are not going to get that we’re not trying to threaten them. What does pluralism actually mean? It means that we’re not trying to replace them with us. We’re trying to live alongside them. They see us as a threat to their existence, where we don’t see them as a threat to our existence. We see them as another stone in the mosaic. Another piece of the puzzle of what Israeli society is all about. I’m happy that there are Haredim in the world.²⁴⁸

Unfortunately, a culture of pluralism and understanding is unlikely to form on its own. Until the Knesset formally initiates a separation of religion and state there will be an unequal power of authority between Israel’s Jewish denominations. Rabbi Weinberg believes that religious pluralism is possible “but it has to be mandated from the

²⁴⁶ John Ungerleider, “Chapter 8: Conflict,” in *Effective Multicultural Teams: Theory and Practice*, ed. Claire B. Halverson and S. Aqeel Tirmizi (Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), 9.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

²⁴⁸ Transcript of phone interview with Joshua Weinberg, September 2, 2016, p. 6.

government. The government has to stop capitulating to the Haredim.”²⁴⁹ Until a model of pluralism is embedded within Israel’s governing structure, complete Jewish pluralism cannot become a reality.

A culture of religious pluralism has not yet been implemented at the Kotel. Rabbi Rabinowitz, who oversees the Western Wall, offers his perspective for how one should behave at the Kotel, comparing it to the behavior that a child should have in the home of his or her grandparent:

Never in my life have I asked any male or female Jew what denomination they are affiliated with. Since I became an adult, I’m doing my best to see every Jew in the way that God looks at us: ‘You are children of the Lord, your God’ (Deut. 14:1). Everybody beloved. Everybody wanted. The most precious place for the Jewish people in our time, specifically the one place that Jews from all denominations are united for the most fundamental, deep, common value which is being part of the tradition of Israel [is the Kotel.] This is similar to a happy family reunion of grandkids and great, grandkids in the house of grandpa and grandma. Is there a right for one grandkid to enforce his opinion on another? Of course not! But, in the grandparents’ house, the descendants will give up the characteristics that made them distant from the previous generations and adopt the traditions that tie everybody into one family. The whole world is open for them to

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

express their unique behaviors. When you go to grandpa and grandma's
you should give up these things.²⁵⁰

Rabbi Rabinowitz's analogy compares the Kotel to a home of one's grandparents. His perspective understands that there is more than one way to be Jewish, but it does not allow for this pluralistic practice at the Western Wall. Instead, those who practice customs that align with the progressive streams of Judaism should yield to traditional ultra-Orthodox practice when at the Western Wall. Where the analogy does not fully equate is who the metaphorical grandparents represent at the Kotel. Is this analogy about showing respect in a site of Jewish ancestry, showing respect to God (in a house of God), or showing respect to those who practice ultra-Orthodox Judaism? His analogy suggests that he views the Kotel as the home of the ultra-Orthodox, as an ultra-Orthodox site, comparable to how he oversees it. Therefore, he may have meant that those who practice newer customs must be respectful to those who practice older customs by refraining from performing them. This once Israeli national site has been transformed into a Haredi synagogue that requests all Jews to conform to one way of practice when present. This is a structure that is far from embracing diversity.

To expand on this, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation not only rejects Jewish pluralism at the site but exercises religious coercion.²⁵¹ Lesley Sachs explains that:

For a group of men to decide what's modest, what's not modest—'you should put something on your shoulders,' 'you should cover your elbows,' 'you should cover your ears,'—this is unacceptable to me, especially since

²⁵⁰ Written interview with Shmuel Rabinowitz, September 18, 2016, p. 2. Translated from Hebrew by Ofer Beit-Halachmi.

²⁵¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 4.

this is not a synagogue. This belongs to me, to everybody. Praying in this wonderful group of sisters together with this joint cause to a joint God, and having our rights infringed on in such a way is something very meaningful.²⁵²

Modesty, known in Hebrew as *tzniut*, is also a concept that refers to the modest dress of women in ultra-Orthodox Judaism.²⁵³ At the entrance to the Western Wall, personnel who some pejoratively refer to as the “fashion police,”²⁵⁴ inspect to see if women are dressed respectfully. They look to see that a woman’s knees, chest, and elbows are covered, as is appropriate dress for entering an Orthodox synagogue. In the past, these enforcers have handed out fabric to use as a skirt or shawl to Kotel visitors dressed inappropriately. This religious coercion indicates that the Western Wall is controlled as if it were an ultra-Orthodox synagogue; this does not allow for a culture of Jewish pluralism.

A more imperative question is what will it take to make Jewish pluralism a reality in Israeli society? Anat Hoffman’s answer is getting rid of the Chief Rabbinate altogether:

We need to take away their monopoly, their absolute power, their funding, the government power that they have behind them to decide life choices for the rest of us and to define what Judaism is. Let them compete with all the rest of us in the plane of religious services, and may the best rabbi win.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ For more information on this concept, see Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1998).

²⁵⁴ For an example of the “fashion police,” see Mordechai I. Twersky, “Women Jailed for Praying Aloud at Western Wall Barred From Holy Site for 30 Days,” *Haaretz*, October 19, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/woman-jailed-for-praying-aloud-at-western-wall-barred-from-holy-site-for-30-days.premium-1.470884> (accessed May 3, 2017).

In every community, may the best rabbi win.²⁵⁵

Hoffman's answer calls upon the government to recognize each Jewish stream as equal, and then redistribute power and funding equally. It is a criticism on the current arrangement of religion and state. She calls upon the restoration of power to the people in order to choose for themselves what role religion shall play in their lives and what stream of Jewish practice is preferable. Rabbi Sabath Beit-Halachmi believes that "government funding for non-orthodox rabbis and institutions" is gradually happening, which is a positive direction towards creating a more pluralistic society.²⁵⁶ She also thinks that what will be effective for Israeli society is a "combination of awareness, a values clarification for secular Israelis with politicians to support them" as well as "the pressure from the diaspora."²⁵⁷ Similar to the poll conducted by *The Jerusalem Post* and the American Jewish Committee that discovered Israeli Jews value democracy over halakha, Israeli Jews need to clarify for themselves which values are most important to them and ensure that they are upheld by their government.²⁵⁸

Women of the Wall is an example of the pluralism that is possible in Israeli society. This is demonstrated by the organization's ability to function as a multi-denominational prayer group as well as its ability to collaborate with other denominations for the construction of a third pluralistic section at the Western Wall.²⁵⁹ Cheryl Birkner Mack said that she was "very drawn to the open-mindedness, the multi-denominational aspect of Nashot HaKotel," explaining that she has

²⁵⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 3.

²⁵⁶ Transcript of interview with Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, August 1, 2016, p. 9.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Pew Research Center, "Israel's Religiously Divided Society."

²⁵⁹ This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

...been involved in the Jewish world for certainly much of [her] professional life, and it's not very common for interdenominational Jewish practices to happen, particularly when it's around *tefillah* [(prayer)]. We can get together on social action, and we can get together on maybe a few other things, but to get together on *tefillah* is quite a challenge. I was always very impressed by that, and was pleased to be part of a group that honored each other.²⁶⁰

The prayer group even successfully wrote a *siddur* (Jewish prayerbook) together that respects the beliefs of each denomination. Not one denomination must yield to another; all are valued. Hoffman says that Women of the Wall is “the only living proof that all streams of Judaism can work together, pray together, sing together, dance together, celebrate together and go to different synagogues for Rosh Hashanah. You know we're all going to separate synagogues, not two of us go to the same one. Now, that's wonderful, and we're sisters.”²⁶¹ The women that form the prayer group come from diverse streams of Judaism but are able to come together for the sake of praying to God and being part of a Jewish community. They recognize that they hold common values, and that their differences do not have to interfere with their collective ambitions. Women of the Wall has also successfully formed a coalition with organizations representing Reform, Conservative and Orthodox denominations for the development of a pluralistic prayer space at the Kotel.²⁶² Betsy Kallus of WOW believes that the only way to overcome the intolerance in Israeli society “is by us finding ways to work together. I think that the

²⁶⁰ Interview with Skype Interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, 2 September 2016: 3.

²⁶¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 7.

²⁶² Ibid. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

coalition that Women of the Wall has developed is one small piece of overcoming the difference.”²⁶³ Rabbi Jacobs believes that an equalization of political power is central to creating the foundation for effective dialogue. He has described how the coalition for the formation of the third section at the Western Wall is a model of genuine religious pluralism:

If you give political power to the ultra-Orthodox, we won't have a level playing field. When you take away political power [as we have] here in New York, even the very right wing of the Haredi, they'll sit with us. They may not agree with us about anything, but I think we have a model of pluralism that's quite inspiring. The big difference [in Israel] is once you remove that one group that can actually legislate against the others, or prevent the others from exercising their religious rights, of course, there's not going to be a very respectful relationship—that, by the way, surprised the prime minister. We brought our group from the Jewish Federation—it was Chabad, Rabbinical Council of America, the Orthodox Rabbinical Association, Orthodox Union, Central Conference of American Rabbis, United Synagogue, and the Rabbinical Assembly. We went into the prime minister's office and he's looking, 'How are all of you sitting here and nobody's fighting?' Again, we disagree, but with deep respect, and it was just astonishing for Israelis to see that diverse of a group that genuinely knows how to work together.²⁶⁴

This coalition, built as a result of the Women of the Wall controversy, serves as a

²⁶³ Transcript of Skype interview with Betsy Kallus, August 1, 2016, p. 13.

²⁶⁴ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, pp. 10–11.

paradigm for religious pluralism in Israeli society.

With the analysis of Israel's current political structure, which impinges upon the rights of its citizens, Jewish pluralism will only become a reality with an arrangement of religion and state that gives each denomination an equal status. The survival of Israel as a homeland for all Jews and as a "Jewish and democratic" state depends upon its ability to adopt a pluralistic political structure. Rabbi Jacobs states, "It's the Jewish state. I don't want it to not be the Jewish state, but I don't want only Orthodox institutions privileged."²⁶⁵ As a homeland for *all* Jews, Israel needs to show its support for diaspora Jewry, and this means accepting all Jewish denominations. Women of the Wall Public Relations Director, Shira Puce, believes that Israel "cannot survive without welcoming our Jewish brothers and sisters all over the world to be here as fully identified as themselves."²⁶⁶ She explains that Israel's relationship with diaspora Jewry must be based on real mutual support for one another. This support cannot just be about Israel accepting checks but about Israel accepting diaspora Jewry itself, making it feel welcome in Israeli society.²⁶⁷ As for the protection of Israel's democratic character, this will only happen if Israel accepts that there is no one Jewish denomination and no one religion suitable for all people. Anat Hoffman argues that religious pluralism is:

...a realistic goal because it is a necessary ingredient for [Israel's] survival. We will not be able to live together unless we accept pluralism and celebrate pluralism, not just tolerate it, but celebrate it. Now, the word for tolerance in Hebrew is *savlanut* and the word *sevel*, 'suffering,' is right

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p.10.

²⁶⁶ Transcript of Skype interview with Shira Puce, August 28, 2016, p. 14.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

there in the middle of *savlanut*. I tolerate, I ‘suffer’ your otherness. That shouldn’t be so. It shouldn’t be a suffering for one Jew to see others in their worship, be it Christian, Muslim or Jewish, other Jewish streams. It shouldn’t be suffering; it should enrich our lives. Unless we understand that, we will not fit in this nasty neighborhood, and we will not fit in the modern world. That's what fitting means: it means that we are able to celebrate others, not fight them tooth and nail. We don’t have the ultimate truth, we hold part of it; they do too.²⁶⁸

Religious pluralism is about accepting that more than one religion or denomination can be divinely inspired, legitimate and can hold value and saving truths.²⁶⁹ Without respecting differences and treating each Jewish denomination as equal, Israeli society will not be able to endure as a democratic state.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored Women of the Wall’s social values of religious pluralism and feminism. It questioned whether Women of the Wall and its principles are imports, part of modernity, or fundamental to Judaism. Through this analysis, the “argument for authenticity” does not hold any weight in the eyes of Women of the Wall since the prayer group’s main goal is for civil rights and ultimately the strengthening of Israel’s democracy. To WOW, the source of social values does not make the values more or less important. Instead, what matters is the endeavor for greater equality. In the end, the possibility of religious pluralism in a theocracy was evaluated. It was concluded that in

²⁶⁸ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 2.

²⁶⁹ Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism*, 3.

order for religious pluralism to come to fruition, Israel's current political structure, which does not have separation of religion and state, will need to be remodeled into one that places all Jewish denominations on an equal plane. Until this change is made, Israel's portrayal as a home for *all* Jews and as a democratic state will be a mere vision.

CHAPTER 4: TO COMPROMISE OR NOT TO COMPROMISE?

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the various compromises that have been proposed to date regarding women's prayer at the Western Wall. The chapter will present the current plan for an egalitarian third section at the Western Wall and offer various viewpoints of this compromise. It will explain the rise of the prayer group that calls itself the Original-Women of the Wall (O-WOW) and present its perspective on the most recent compromise. Lastly, this chapter will offer an evaluation of what the agreement for a third section could represent for liberal Judaism in Israel: official political acceptance and recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

Robinson's Arch

Robinson's Arch, an extension of the Western Wall,²⁷⁰ located at the southern end of the Kotel, is a site that has been proposed by the Supreme Court as an alternate prayer space for Women of the Wall. On April 6, 2003, the High Court ruled that WOW could no longer hold prayer services at the Western Wall. Instead, the group would be permitted to hold them at nearby Robinson's Arch.²⁷¹ The decision provided that should the government fail to convert the Arch into a proper prayer area within one year, WOW would then be permitted to pray in its manner in the women's section at the Western Wall.²⁷² In August 2004, after additional time was granted by the Court to the government, an alternative prayer site was inaugurated at the Robinson's Arch

²⁷⁰ Robinson's Arch is located at the southern end of the Western Wall, not to be confused with the southern wall. The site was named after the biblical scholar Edward Robinson who discovered the arch in 1838.

²⁷¹ State Dept. (US) and Senate (US) Committee on Foreign Relations, "Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, 2004" (Washington DC: Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations and House, Committee on International Relations, 2005), 552.

²⁷² Jewish Women's Archives, "Women of the Wall," <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/women-of-wall> (accessed January 2, 2017).

excavations.²⁷³ However, this space was not designed in collaboration with Women of the Wall.

To Women of the Wall, Robinson's Arch was often referred to as "the back of the bus," a reference to the Civil Rights Movement when African-Americans were forced to sit in the back of public buses. In an interview with Anat Hoffman by Phyllis Chesler, published in the 2003 book *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*, Hoffman said, "We see accepting [Robinson's Arch] as accepting second-class citizenship. Look, I don't need the government's permission to let me pray next to any other wall in Jerusalem. There is just this one Wall..."²⁷⁴ For Women of the Wall, this proposal was not seen as a suitable compromise. The prayer space at Robinson's Arch consists of a platform over the archeological excavations, which only comes in contact with a small section of the Western Wall. The site can only fit approximately fifty worshippers. Even more unacceptable is that the location is unnoticeable from the main entrance of the Western Wall, making it inconspicuous as an option as a genuine place for prayer.

This initial proposal of Robinson's Arch, a departure from the northern section of the Kotel, can be viewed as an intentional move to keep non-Orthodox prayer out of sight and out of mind. An important element to note is the great distance of Robinson's Arch from the northern section of the Western Wall. As Professor of Law Frances Raday points out: "at a place situated out of the sight and earshot of the general public, the state permits women to don *tallitot* and read from a Torah scroll."²⁷⁵ However, while Women

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, 53.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

of the Wall was barred from using tallitot and holding a Torah service in the women's section of the Western Wall, no regulations prevent[ed] the prayer group or other women from going there to sing and pray the Hallel service.²⁷⁶ As a result, following renovations of Robinson's Arch, each month Women of the Wall prayed Hallel in the women's section of the Western Wall and then walked over to Robinson's Arch for the Torah service. Nevertheless, the group maintained its goal of women's prayer according to their custom in the women's section of the Western Wall.

Kedushah: The Question of Holiness

Another reason Robinson's Arch has been seen as an unacceptable place for prayer revolves around the notion of *kedushah*, the Hebrew word for "holiness." *Kedushah* is a principle that has been discussed as part of the compromise for a new prayer space at Robinson's Arch, located at the southern end of the Western Wall. Many have argued that the level of *kedushah* is not as elevated in this place as in the northern section of the Western Wall. This theological discussion questions what causes something to be "holy?"

Rabbi Louis Jacobs,²⁷⁷ the founder of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in London, has offered a definition for "holiness" that may help to answer this question. He defines *kedushah* as: "That which is elevated above any material concept and distinguished from any secular concept or is separated for the name of the Lord. Holiness,

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Louis Jacobs was a Jewish philosopher from the United Kingdom who died at the age of eighty-six in 2006. He is well known for his endeavor to find a balance between traditional Judaism and modernity.

in other words, is a religious concept.”²⁷⁸ Jacobs explains that holiness has to do with being in touch with what is spiritual. “This involves a certain readiness to give up too much attachment to worldly things, a degree of separation from material pleasure, though not its denial.”²⁷⁹ He infers that holiness is something ascribed by human beings and attributed to sacred intention and interaction with what is considered spiritual or holy.

One answer to the question of *kedushah* is that the holiness of a place is defined by human interaction with what is sacred at that location. Professor Shulamit Magnus, a core activist of O-WOW, understands *kedushah* in a similar manner. Thus, it frustrates her when people attempt to convince her that Robinson’s Arch is an acceptable compromise:

I know very well that Robinson’s Arch is part of the continuation of the same wall, I know that, anybody with a modicum of education knows that. That argument [that Robinson’s Arch is still the Western Wall] is used, and it’s disingenuous. The Kotel is what we all call the ‘Kotel.’ When visiting dignitaries come to Israel, when the Pope comes to Israel, they don’t take them to Robinson’s Arch. They take them to the Kotel; we all know what the Kotel is. If in time, people go to Robinson's and they sanctify it with their *tefillot* (prayers) and their hopes and their yearning, then indeed in time, I don’t know how much time, but in time, it could attain sanctity.²⁸⁰

She argues that what causes something to be sanctified is Jewish behavior and Jewish memory which is gained over time.

²⁷⁸ Louis Jacobs, “Holiness According to Jewish Tradition,” *Service Internationale de Documentation Judeo-Chretienne*, 30, no. 7 (1997), <http://louisjacobs.org/articles/holiness-according-to-jewish-tradition/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Transcript of Skype interview with Shulamit Magnus, September 4, 2016, p. 12.

WOW Director Lesley Sachs believes that the formation of Jewish memory can take place at any time; it is never too late for the attribution and creation of holiness in a new place. She recalls that the Women of the Wall board held many discussions around the topic:

We believe that *kedusha* is something that people give a place. It could be a tree in India, and it could be a building, and it could be the Kotel. It's the same way if the new plaza is built in the way that we envision,...it will have that feeling of *kedusha* and the more people that pray in it, [the more] the feeling will be a feeling of holiness just like in the Northern Plaza.²⁸¹

Sachs admitted that the site will not look the same, but it will be a beautiful place that includes *sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls)—the holy book of the Jewish people which is currently not allowed in the women's section at the Western Wall.²⁸² The new plaza would be an inclusive environment that would be sanctified by egalitarian and pluralistic worshippers.

Proposal for a Third Section at the Western Wall

Part I: Sharansky Plan

In April 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky to further examine the inequality of women's prayer at the Western Wall and propose some solutions. Sharansky came to New York to meet with Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis and leaders at the offices of Gerrald (Jerry) B. Silverman, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Jewish Federations of North

²⁸¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 8.

²⁸² Ibid.

America.²⁸³ Sharansky presented a plan for an egalitarian, third prayer section. In the *Jerusalem Post* article, “Women of the Wall React to Sharansky Proposal,” reporter Jeremy Sharon wrote that, “The chairman’s plan, devised in cooperation with MK Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid) and Deputy Religious Services Minister Eli Ben-Dahan, among others, involves the expansion of the current Western Wall Plaza to comprise an area from the northern end of the Western Wall site down to the southern end of the wall by Robinson’s Arch.”²⁸⁴ Sharon specified that:

The plan calls for the current prayer area at Robinson’s Arch, which was designated for non-Orthodox prayer in 2003 by the Supreme Court, to be elevated to the same level as the current plaza area, and for the area running along the Western Wall to be divided into three equal parts – male, female, and egalitarian – with one entrance to the entire complex set to be created.²⁸⁵

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, who was in attendance at the New York meeting with Chairman Sharansky explained that a blueprint of the physical design “had the same stone floor; the same huge expanse of exposed second temple stones. When everybody saw that we said, ‘Perfect. That’s exactly what we want. We want complete equality.’” However, this design was soon withdrawn because it was impractical. Extending the floor from the women’s section all the way to Robinson’s Arch posed many problems, specifically with the barrier of the Mughrabi Bridge, which leads up to the Temple Mount.

²⁸³ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 1.

²⁸⁴ Jeremy Sharon, “Women of Wall React to Sharansky Proposal,” *Jerusalem Post*, April 13, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/National-News/Women-of-Wall-react-to-Sharansky-proposal-309415> (accessed April 25, 2017).

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

Part II: Mandelblit Plan

On May 22, 2013, following opposition of the Sharansky Plan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed an advisory team on the issue of prayer arrangements at the Western Wall. The team's mandate was to evaluate the current prayer arrangements, determine the necessary changes, and create a plan of action.²⁸⁶ It was at this time that Mr. Avichai Mandelblit, Cabinet Secretary, was assigned to head the advisory team. Cheryl Birkner Mack explained that at the start, Women of the Wall "held consistently that Robinson's Arch was not an appropriate place for *tefillah*."²⁸⁷ The prayer group maintained that it "wanted to be at the Kotel like every other Jew."²⁸⁸ However, in October 2013, after being invited once more to enter into negotiations with the government for the formation of a proper prayer space, the WOW board of directors voted nine-to-two in favor of this step. This decision followed only after much debate among the WOW board members and was not an easy one to make.²⁸⁹

Women of the Wall entered into negotiations to find a suitable compromise for an egalitarian third prayer space at the Western Wall. The coalition of Jewish organizations included Women of the Wall, represented by Anat Hoffman and Betsy (Batya) Kallus, the Jewish Federations of North America, the Union for Reform Judaism (Rabbi Rick Jacobs), the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (Rabbi Steven Wernick), The Rabbinical Assembly (Rabbi Julie Schonfeld), the Israeli Movement for Progressive

²⁸⁶The Advisory Team for the Issue of Prayer Arrangements at the Western Wall, "Recommendations," 2016, <https://www.scribd.com/document/299941574/Western-Wall-prayer-arrangements-recommendations> (accessed May 15, 2017).

²⁸⁷ Transcript of Skype interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 13.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Jeremy Sharon, "How Did the Western Wall Prayer Saga Start and How Is It Likely to End?" *Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Up-against-the-wall-467811> (accessed May 15, 2017).

Judaism (Rabbi Gilad Kariv), and the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel (Yizhar Hess).²⁹⁰ The coalition set objectives²⁹¹ for the physical structure of the third section, the site's administrative structure, and the reclamation of the Kotel's communal plaza behind the men and women's sections, known as the *Rachava HaElyonia* (Upper Plaza).

A) Design

The plan for the third section would ensure a pluralistic egalitarian prayer space with the proposed name "*Ezrat Yisrael*" (plaza for all Israel). This section would include Torah scrolls and prayerbooks for all to use. For the purpose of inclusivity, it would also include a portable *mechitza* (divider) for those who wished to pray in a women's only prayer group. In an article entitled, "Western Wall prayer fight ends with Historic Compromise," Ben Sales of the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* reported that after nearly three years, the compromise called for "the creation of an 'official and respected,' 9,700-square foot prayer space in the non-Orthodox section of the Western Wall, running along a 31-foot segment of the wall, that Sharansky said will fit approximately 1,200 people."²⁹² In addition, Sharansky estimated a construction timeframe of up to two years.²⁹³ One significant objective was to have one single entrance for the entire Western Wall, presenting clear choices to all three prayer sections. This change would support the visibility and equality of prayer sections, allowing visitors to clearly choose for

²⁹⁰ Transcript of Skype Interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 2.

²⁹¹ The Advisory Team for the Issue of Prayer Arrangements at the Western Wall, "Recommendations."

²⁹² Ben Sales, "Western Wall Prayer Fight Ends with Historic Compromise," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 31, 2016, <http://www.jta.org/2016/01/31/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/western-wall-prayer-fight-ends-with-historic-compromise> (accessed April 25, 2017).

²⁹³ Ibid.

themselves areas for traditional or egalitarian prayer.

B) Supervision

Another objective was for Women of the Wall, along with the Reform and Conservative movements, to be among those holding administrative positions to oversee the site. This would allow WOW and the liberal denominations according to Rabbi Jacobs, to “decide the policies and administer an Israeli governmental budget.”

C) Reclamation of National Plaza

Women of the Wall also negotiated for the Upper Plaza at the Western Wall to be reclaimed as a national site instead of being governed by Haredi regulations and halakha.

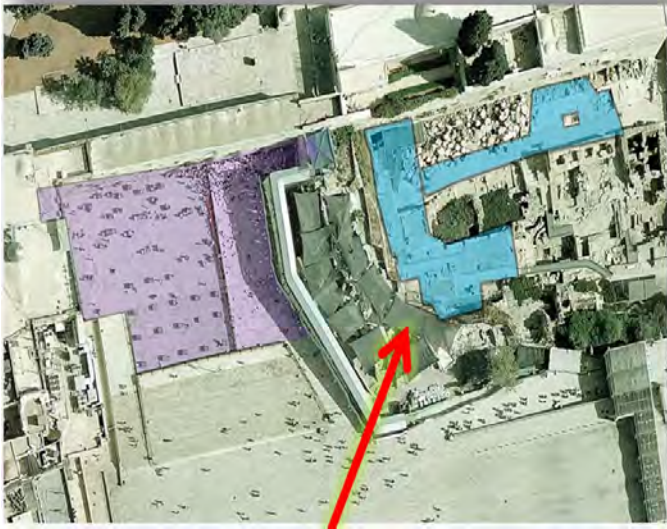
Rabbi Rick Jacobs explains that until this negotiation, Rabbi Rabinowitz

...believed that [the Upper Plaza] was an extension of his area of oversight. He could treat that as part of his ‘synagogue,’ and he would stop if there was a *tekes* (a ceremony going on) to indoctrinate female soldiers into the IDF,²⁹⁴ he would object if there was a woman singing “Hatikvah” or if there was a Yom HaShoah commemoration and women participated, because a woman's voice is *kol isha*. Well it turns out that's never been legally his area, and this decision also took back the wider plaza to belong to the wider, Jewish people and to the citizens of Israel,

²⁹⁴ For more information regarding this conflict of religion and state, see <http://forward.com/sisterhood/174300/anger-over-kotel-kaddish-ban-leads-to-reversal/> (accessed April 25, 2017).

not as an Orthodox prayer space.²⁹⁵

This condition of the compromise would gain back part of the Western Wall as a national site once again.



In Purple section: Western Wall Northern Plaza
In Blue: Plan for Western Wall Southern Plaza

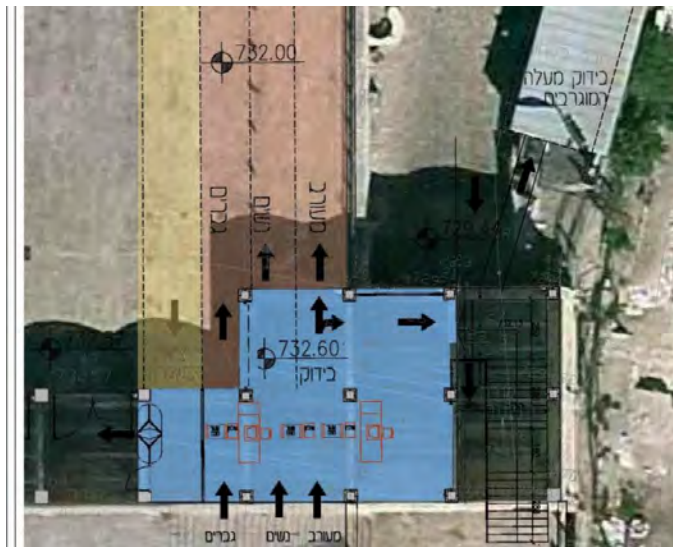
Credit: *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*
<http://www.jta.org/2016/01/31/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/3-maps-that-explain-the-western-wall-compromise> (accessed May 15, 2017).



Plan for new prayer plaza “Ezrat Yisrael”

Credit: *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*
<http://www.jta.org/2016/01/31/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/3-maps-that-explain-the-western-wall-compromise> (accessed May 15, 2017).

²⁹⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 4.



Plan for One Entrance to the Western Wall, with three choices side-by-side: Men, Women and Mixed

Credit: *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*

<http://www.jta.org/2016/01/31/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/3-maps-that-explain-the-western-wall-compromise> (accessed May 15, 2017).

Objections

Since the news of this developing compromise broke out, many different groups and organizations have spoken out about the highly contested site. Robinson's Arch is a well-known archeological site—part of The Jerusalem Archeological Park – Davidson Center²⁹⁶—governed by the Israel Antiquities Authority. When Ronny Reich, an archeologist who is head of the Archeological Council of Israel, heard about the new plan for Robinson's Arch, he joined others in signing a protest letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stating that creating a new prayer space at the Western Wall near Robinson's Arch would damage “the most important archeological site for the Jewish People.”²⁹⁷ Jewish archeologists have not been the only group to object to the idea. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has also objected to any construction since the news of the

²⁹⁶ The Jerusalem Archeological Park—Davidson Center, http://www.archpark.org.il/article.asp?period_id=1&id=62 (accessed April 25, 2017).

²⁹⁷ Helena Flusfeder, “The Most Important Archeological Site for the Jewish People,” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Secrets-uncovered-near-Robinsons-Arch-456448> (accessed April 25, 2017).

Sharansky Plan. The PA Religious Affairs Minister, Mahmoud El Habash, said that “Any change in the Temple Mount is unacceptable to the Palestinians or Arabs. It’s a change of our heritage site and I believe that such a change will push us toward a new conflict.”²⁹⁸

Original-Women of the Wall (O-WOW)

Perhaps the most notable opposition to the compromise comes from members who were once part of Women of the Wall itself. In October 2013, following Women of the Wall’s agreement to negotiate an egalitarian section, a rift in the prayer group occurred. A couple of board members who did not agree with the decision to negotiate for a third section at the Kotel left the group. These women felt that the prayer group was abandoning Women of the Wall’s original mission: “an attempt to relive that first service; to once again pray together at that holy site, wear *tallitot*, and read aloud from a Torah scroll” at the women’s section of the Western Wall.²⁹⁹ These women decided to leave Women of the Wall and maintain the struggle for equal rights at the women’s section of the Kotel. Although these women may be considered a ‘splinter group,’ breaking away from the larger Women of the Wall, this is not how they refer to themselves. With the title Original-Women of the Wall (O-WOW), these women say that they “are holding to the charter of the group, that’s been its charter since its beginning.”³⁰⁰ These women feel that they are “stand[ing] firm with the exact goal, the one and only goal of the organization,” while the real “splinter group” is Women of the Wall who has veered from

²⁹⁸ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “Palestinians Object to Natan Sharansky’s Compromise Plan for Western Wall,” *The Forward*, June 13, 2013, <http://forward.com/news/breaking-news/178617/palestinians-object-to-natan-sharanskys-compromise/> (accessed May 15, 2017).

²⁹⁹ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, xx.

³⁰⁰ Transcript of Skype interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p.15.

its original mission.³⁰¹ Original-Women of the Wall has chosen to remain in the women's section. While this group does support non-orthodox *tefillah* (prayer), its primary objective is to establish and secure women's *tefillah* at the Ezrat Nashim, the women's section of the Kotel.

Original-Women of the Wall gathers once a month in the women's section at the Western Wall to hold a *shacharit* (morning) service with its largest gathering being thirty worshippers.³⁰² It has active supporters in North America as well as 1,409 Facebook followers as of January 2017.³⁰³ The prayer group also has its own website describing itself as “the founders, leaders, and activists of this cause since 1988” and as “an independent, autonomous, pluralistic, feminist group.”³⁰⁴ Original-Women of the Wall believes that if they abandon the women's section this move will allow the Western Wall to be transformed into an official religious site. Professor Shulamit Magnus, one of the founders of Women of the Wall and now of O-WOW, and in attendance at the very first women's *tefillah* in 1988 states, “You make a deal with them [the Haredi establishment] and you give the national holy site of the Jewish people to that establishment.”³⁰⁵ Their belief is that a compromise for an egalitarian section would hinder the ability to restore the Western Wall as a national holy site. On the other hand, Lesley Sachs feels that the Western Wall “hasn't been a national site for many, many years,” so the compromise would be a way to address the current situation.³⁰⁶ In addition, Sachs has stated that the new compromise would turn the Western Wall Upper Plaza, located behind the men and

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ <https://www.facebook.com/OriginalWomenoftheWall/>.

³⁰⁴ “Original Women of the Wall: תפילת נשים בכותל,” <https://www.originalwow.org> (accessed April 25, 2017).

³⁰⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Shulamit Magnus, September 4, 2016, p. 10.

³⁰⁶ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 7.

women's sections, back into a national site. However, this would not remove the Western Wall from the auspices of the Haredi establishment.

Furthermore, if an agreement with WOW is made, O-WOW fears that it would lose its right to hold women's *tefillah* in the women's section, since women's prayer groups are not recognized as an Ultra-Orthodox custom. Cheryl Birkner Mack, a core activist of the Original-Women of the Wall explains that, "This deal would turn [the Western Wall] over to the rabbinic administrator, Shmuel Rabinovitch, who would have the right to stop you or me or anyone else, including a man, because they don't like the way we look, they don't like the way we pray, they don't like the way we dress. He would have complete rights."³⁰⁷ In a *Jerusalem Post* editorial, Magnus explains that after an agreement is made, "Women who will not move to Robinson's Arch would be arrested. This aspect of the deal is deliberately obscured by its backers, who trumpet the deal as enlightened and progressive, without mentioning the coercive, misogynistic aspect at its core."³⁰⁸ The women fear that their own rights—to halakhically pray as a prayer group in the women's section—would be removed because it is not accepted as Orthodox prayer. Rabbi Jacobs has stated that the new section would include a portable *mechitza* for these women to pray how they prefer, in a women's-only minyan.³⁰⁹ He explains:

I care deeply about changing Orthodox Judaism to be more inclusive of women's voices, but at the end of the day this set of negotiations was to change the state of Israel. Changing the Jewish people's practice of Orthodox Judaism: that's going to

³⁰⁷ Transcript of Skype interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 11.

³⁰⁸ Shulamit Magnus, "An Appeal From an Original Woman of the Wall," *The Jerusalem Post*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/An-appeal-from-an-original-Woman-of-the-Wall-456566> (accessed April 25, 2017).

³⁰⁹ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 7.

be a generational challenge.

Original-Women of the Wall understands that Women of the Wall's decision to negotiate an egalitarian prayer space may be a functional solution, but O-WOW does not see it as a way to gain full equality. As activist Cheryl Birkner Mack has expressed it: "I'm not in this for practical [reasons], I'm in this for what I believe is correct, and what I hope is that my great-granddaughters, when they look back on this, they will say that I stood up for what was right, not for what was possible."³¹⁰

Compromise Perspectives

There are many diverse perspectives on the creation of an egalitarian third section at the Western Wall. Some see the compromise as a relinquishing of rights while others see it as an opportunity not to be wasted. However, the various perspectives are not black and white. Many key individuals involved in this compromise recognize that sometimes positives can outweigh the negatives. Perspectives from Women of the Wall, Chairman of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel will be included in the discussion.

A) Women of the Wall

One may question how WOW Chairwoman Anat Hoffman can go from calling Robinson's Arch the "back of the bus" to accepting a compromise at that site. Hoffman admits that:

Women of the Wall were never excited about the third section; we were

³¹⁰ Transcript of interview with Cheryl Birkner Mack, September 2, 2016, p. 18.

always connected to the women's section, and we wanted to stay there.

The third section is the way the government of Israel is saying, [as well as] the Supreme Court, that this is a compromise that will bring peace. This is a serious consideration. For women of the wall, this was a consideration that we will be together with the Reform and Conservative movements at the non-Orthodox plaza. This is a big compromise for us, a huge sacrifice.³¹¹

Hoffman does see this compromise as relinquishing deserved rights at the women's section of the Kotel; however, she believes that compromise is a necessary part of political life and social change:

As you know, some of our people left us because they were so disillusioned and angry that we were willing to open a negotiation with Prime Minister Netanyahu. We did it because this is the responsible thing to do. If the Prime Minister asks an NGO to come and speak, you don't say, 'Go jump in the lake.' The purpose of an NGO is to change policy, and when the Prime Minister says, 'let's come and talk and see how we can change,' you sit with him.³¹²

Hoffman understands that Women of the Wall has been offered a real opportunity that may have profound implications for *k'lal Yisrael* (the Jewish collective) and for liberal Jewry in both the diaspora and Israel. With this compromise, Hoffman's expectation is that the potential outcomes will outweigh the sacrifices:

...not looking forward to the third section, but reluctantly we will go there

³¹¹ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 8.

³¹² Ibid.

because we think it's a great cultural redemption of this place that was such a place of strife. We're not going there because we're tired or we had attrition. We're going there because we believe in the Jewish people, and this is a solution that too many wise commissions, judges, prime ministers appointed; this is the solution that the government of Israel is willing to accept.³¹³

Women of the Wall recognizes that its social cause can affect more people than just its supporters. Lesley Sachs points out that, "there's a law in Israel that every pupil, during their twelve years at school, needs to be brought to the Kotel twice by the school...every pupil that comes sees now only an ultra-Orthodox way of being Jewish and meets only with the Kotel Heritage Foundation."³¹⁴ Once the agreement is made for the creation of an egalitarian third space, "they'll see that there are other options. I think that's a wonderful thing."³¹⁵ She expects that the new section will teach others that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

Sachs further explains that offering people a choice may be one reason why the ultra-Orthodox do not accept Jewish pluralism. With the negotiation for one main entrance to all three prayer sections, Jews will be able to publicly choose non-orthodox prayer. She argues that:

the fact that anyone who comes to the Kotel and walks in through the gates would be able to choose, that's a new concept here in Israel: you choose your religious way. That's, by the way, why they [the Haredim]

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Transcript of Skype interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 6.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

won't have it. That's the reason for the whole fight against us because that's exactly what they're scared of: that a Jew will have that choice. I truly believe in religious pluralism and in religious rights, and I know that the Haredi women don't want us there [in the women's section]. I don't think we need to be in their face if we have an alternative, so I'm all for [the negotiated third section].³¹⁶

This concept of "choice" and the act of negotiating may threaten Haredi supremacy and strengthen the legitimization of Jewish pluralism in Israel. Sachs also acknowledges that having a third section will allow the orthodox and the non-orthodox to pray in their own plazas, according to their ways, without inconveniencing one another.

B) An Ultra-Orthodox Perspective: Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, Chairman of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the Chairman of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, holds a valuable perspective for understanding how Women of the Wall is perceived by many ultra-Orthodox Jews. Comprehending the perspective of those in opposition is key to knowing where a dialogue should begin. For Rabbi Rabinowitz, the notion of religious pluralism at the Kotel is one that he opposes:

I do understand the strong motivation to receive legitimacy to the new Jewish ways, intentionally at the Western Wall. There is no other place that the eyes of all Israel are looking at than the Western Wall, but with what price? Since the day I started my role, I am guarding the Western

³¹⁶ Ibid.

Wall and do everything I can to prevent use of the Western Wall to any purpose that will use it for any one goal. It is sixteen years that the members of my family and I have lived under huge pressure from the media and from extremists, both from the religious parties and from the liberal parties. Both claim against me that I place obstacles which prevent their ability to express their own truth at the Kotel. I am proud of it. When we come to the Western Wall, not rights we should demand, but common responsibility and obligation to this sacred place and to the unity of the Jewish people.³¹⁷

Rabbi Rabinowitz fears that the Kotel has been exploited to legitimize progressive Judaism. He talks about “unity of the Jewish people” but a distinction must be made between unity and sameness in Jewish practice. Despite this, he has participated in negotiations, stating:

I was a partner on the committee established by the Prime Minister. I was clear about my position to the idea of not partitioning the Kotel to different denominations and tribes. But at the same time, I wanted to follow the rule of the sages that says, ‘Peace is more important.’ I wanted to explore every way to finish this in a civil way (literally: a way between brothers).³¹⁸

To this end, in January 2016, Rabbi Rabinowitz agreed to the compromise.

However, two months later, he revoked his position requesting the Haredi

³¹⁷ Written interview with Shmuel Rabinowitz, September 18, 2016, p. 2. Translated by Ofer Beit-Halachmi.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

political parties in the Knesset to pass a law repealing the compromise.³¹⁹ Liberal Jewish leaders believe this move was enacted to place pressure on Haredi politicians to take action opposing the compromise he agreed to, so all of the responsibility and censure would not fall on his shoulders.³²⁰

C) Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel

The Masorti (Conservative) movement in Israel holds a unique standpoint on the compromise, having already signed an agreement with the government in 2000 to pray at Robinson's Arch.³²¹ A statement released by the Masorti Movement at the time the agreement was reached reads, in part:

With the responsibility and readiness to reach a compromise and to engage in discussions, and in the effort to limit friction and confrontation which could, heaven forbid, escalate to bloodshed, we have decided to accept the proposition for a twelve month trial period, to hold prayers at the southern end of the Kotel, rather than in the main plaza. This is a great day in the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel, a day in which the government has accepted the principle whereby every Jew has the right to pray at the holiest site of the People of Israel, in keeping with his/her custom.³²²

Although this was a positive arrangement which has continued for the Masorti

³¹⁹ Ben Sales, "Western Wall Prayer Deal: Why Liberal Jews Aren't Worried After Losing Orthodox Support," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.jta.org/2016/03/15/default/why-liberal-jews-arent-worried-that-the-western-wall-rabbi-denounced-the-egalitarian-prayer-deal> (accessed May 3, 2017).

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ The Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel, "Milestones in the Struggle for Egalitarian Prayer at the Kotel and the Robinson's Arch Initiative (Azarat Yisrael)," <http://masorti.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Milestones-Kotel-Masorti.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2017).

³²² Ibid.

movement, the government does not monetarily support the site. The movement has its own reservation center for groups and *b'nai mitzvah* celebrations, prayerbooks and Torah scrolls. Yizhar Hess, the Executive Director of the Masorti Movement, has admitted that the relationship between the movement and Women of the Wall has not always been amicable. The Masorti Movement was ready to compromise and use Robinson's Arch as a place for liberal Jewish prayer long before Women of the Wall was prepared to leave the women's section of the Kotel. A government compromise with the Masorti Movement could have ended Women of the Wall's struggle for pluralistic prayer in the northern plaza of the Kotel. Hess explains that "in the history of Women of the Wall, we betrayed them when we accepted the compromise back then to *daven* at Robinson's Arch. Women of the Wall hated this for years. I wasn't involved back then... We accepted the compromise. Women of the Wall didn't."³²³ The reason this was a controversial decision was because the Masorti compromise of creating a location for non-Orthodox prayer conflicted with Women of the Wall's goal of obtaining equal, religious rights in the women's section of the Kotel.

Still, Hess clarifies that the Masorti compromise never gave up the movement's "just claim to get a part of the regular, well-established Kotel—not the back seat of the bus, but the front seat of the bus." With the new compromise, Hess feels that the non-Orthodox streams will be "signing off the historic Kotel" and allowing the *minhag hamakom* (custom of the place) at the northern section of the Kotel to be Orthodox.³²⁴ At the same time, however, Hess believes that non-Orthodox Jews are gaining more than they are losing: "What we gained is the sense of equality, not full equality but a sense of

³²³ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 6.

³²⁴ Ibid.

equality for having one entrance for the Kotel; for having funding; for having regulations that give us the ability, official regulations in the *takkanot*³²⁵ that would set in stone for the first time in the state of Israeli egalitarian *minhag*.”³²⁶ This is an achievement that non-orthodox streams have never had before. Today, the Masorti Movement is part of the Women of the Wall coalition for the creation of a pluralist prayer space at the southern section of the Kotel.

Compromise Decision

On January 31, 2016, the Israeli government approved the compromise for the creation of an egalitarian prayer space at the southern section of the Western Wall. The plan passed in the cabinet by a vote of 15–5.³²⁷ That same day, a *Jerusalem Post* article declared: “Once the changes are implemented and the provisions of the cabinet decisions anchored in the Law for the Holy Sites, Women of the Wall agree to move their services to the egalitarian section.”³²⁸ By September, approximately eight months following this highly celebrated and publicized victory, no progress was made. Prime Minister Netanyahu had neglected the coalition decision, refraining to implement even the first steps of the compromise. Shira Pruce, former Director of Public Relations of Women of the Wall, said the fact that the vote passed was “still quite unprecedented in terms of pluralism in Israel, and this speaks to the power of the pluralistic coalition, American

³²⁵ takkanot (plural for takkanah): legislative enactment within halakha.

³²⁶ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 7.

³²⁷ Jeremy Sharon, “Cabinet Approves ‘Historic’ Decision to Create Western Wall Egalitarian Prayer Space,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 31, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Cabinet-approves-historic-decision-to-create-Western-Wall-egalitarian-prayer-space-443362> (accessed April 25, 2017).

³²⁸ Ibid.

Jewry and Women of the Wall's fight."³²⁹ On the other hand, she reminds us that the failure to implement the plan speaks to the "dysfunctionality of the political system and the strength of the Haredi block."³³⁰ The Israeli Supreme Court has criticized the government for not taking action.³³¹

As of January 11, 2017, the High Court gave the government thirty days "to find 'good cause' why a woman may not read aloud from a Torah scroll as part of prayer services at the Western Wall."³³² With this one edict, the court addressed three petitions: 1) Robinson's Arch does not count as "access" to the Western Wall; 2) the Western Wall Heritage Foundation employees must stop body searches other than general security checks; and 3) there currently is no "good cause" for the prohibition of women's Torah reading at the Western Wall.³³³ The edict has the power to bring about women's Torah reading at the northern section of the Western Wall, specifically where Women of the Wall began its struggle in 1988.

Conclusion: Symbolism and Political Implications

The compromise for an egalitarian third section, overseen by a pluralistic board, may have immense implications for Israeli society and world Jewry. The implementation of the plan would symbolize political acceptance and recognition of non-Orthodox

³²⁹ Skype interview with Shira Pruce, January 20, 2016.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Daniel Sugarman, "Israeli Supreme Court Slams Government for Not Opening Western Wall Egalitarian Area," *The Jewish Chronicle*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.thejc.com/news/israel/israeli-supreme-court-slams-government-for-not-opening-western-wall-egalitarian-area-1.53027> (accessed May 3, 2017).

³³² Amanda Borschel-Dan, "In Landmark Decision, High Court Rules for Women's Western Wall Prayer," *The Times of Israel*, January 11, 2017, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-sweeping-decision-high-court-rules-for-womens-western-wall-prayer/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

³³³ The Original-Women of the Wall also petitioned for this last clause: to read from Torah scrolls at the Kotel.

streams of Judaism. It would also serve as a starting point for future progress in the realm of Jewish pluralism in Israel.

Unlike the current arrangement of Robinson's Arch, which Women of the Wall does not view as a suitable or fair prayer space, the new third section would be a visible choice to all Kotel visitors. The entrance to Robinson's Arch would become one of three options at a main entryway to the entire Kotel. It would include access to Torah scrolls and prayerbooks for use, have a portable *mechitza* (divider) for those who choose to pray in a separate minyan, and be supervised by a pluralistic board. Women of the Wall as well as the leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements will work together to manage an inclusive prayer space for all streams of Judaism. Lastly, the creation of this new prayer space would reclaim part of the Western Wall as a national site open to *k'lal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish people. It could be used for national ceremonies without gender segregation and will be conducted as a national site, not a site exclusively for ultra-Orthodox prayer.

The government recognition of liberal Judaism in Israel has been a long process. Rabbi Joshua Weinberg, President of ARZA, states that "The real success will be not if we actually get our own egalitarian section, which I know is debatable...it's about the government recognizing a non-Orthodox Jewish body of authority over that space. That, to me, is the most critical aspect here."³³⁴ Yizhar Hess agrees: "if it is indeed implemented, it will be the first time that in official regulations, our *minhag* would be recognized."³³⁵

Even more significant is that the Women of the Wall compromise could be a

³³⁴ Transcript of phone interview with Joshua Weinberg, September 2, 2016, p. 2.

³³⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 7.

breakthrough issue, the start of a domino effect for future acceptance of liberal Judaism in Israel. Hess clarifies that Women of the Wall is not the most important issue for Israeli society, but it is an important one to promote. He teaches that, “sometimes, in civil rights activities, you need the singular thing that you are able to get a breakthrough with because it will help you do successful things in other arenas.”³³⁶ Rabbi Weinberg and Hess concur that this acknowledgement of liberal Judaism can lead to real change in Israel, serving as a platform for issues that are even more important to non-Orthodox Jews and affect even more individuals.³³⁷ Women of the Wall may just be that breakthrough issue leading to the actualization of Jewish pluralism in Israel.

³³⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

³³⁷ Transcript of phone interview with Joshua Weinberg, September 2, 2016, p. 3.

CONCLUSION

Looking Back

Dr. Phyllis Chesler, who gathered together a women's-only prayer group in December 1988, could never have imagined that Women of the Wall would become what it is today. She admits that it began as "a theological, religious" intention: to pray at the Western Wall. She continues, "To me, this was not meant to be a political struggle. I was rudely awakened and shocked by how religion is politicized in Israeli fashion, in a way that's just not to be believed, but now I know."³³⁸ Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut's book, *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*, states the prayer group's original aim, "Since that first group service, our struggle has consisted of an attempt to relive that first service; to once again pray together at that holy site, wear *tallitot*, and read aloud from a Torah scroll."³³⁹ Today, accomplishing this mission could have significant implications for the State of Israel.

In Summation

Women of the Wall is a prayer group that has had important effects on Jewish feminism and Jewish notions of religious pluralism. While it has not managed to equally capture the attention of both American Jewry and Israeli society, Women of the Wall is nationally and internationally recognized. Although it has taken time, the prayer group has made advancements in Israeli society and is on the way toward further changing the character of the Western Wall. The first chapter dealing with women in the religious public sphere explained the three main effects WOW has had on Israeli society in this

³³⁸ Transcript of Skype interview with Phyllis Chesler, September 15, 2016, p. 14.

³³⁹ Chesler and Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall*, xx.

domain: 1) It has been a source of consciousness-raising for women's religious equality; 2) It has been a source of Jewish women's empowerment; and 3) It has helped maintain a space for Jewish women to exercise their religious rights in the public sphere. Through media strategies, the prayer group has been able to tell its story, bringing it into Israeli discourse and to the Knesset. The second chapter on the media and Israeli-American relations revealed how media has been used as a tool for social advocacy in both Israel and America. First, it has brought the issues of women's religious equality in the public sphere and religious pluralism in Israel to the forefront. Second, Women of the Wall has educated American Jewry about the Israeli Haredi monopoly and how detrimental it is to the State of Israel. It has also provided more ways for WOW's overseas constituency to become invested and support the prayer group. With American Jewry placing pressure on Israel and encouraging the state to uphold a more democratic character, this partnership with WOW has been advantageous throughout the years. The penultimate chapter discussed the "argument of authenticity" which questioned whether Women of the Wall and its social values are authentic to Israeli society. It explored possible responses to this argument, discussing Israel's culture of imports and culture of progressing with modernity. This chapter demonstrated that no matter where Women of the Wall's social values have originated, they have helped to foster democratic principles in Israeli society. Furthermore, this chapter examined the tension between the Kotel's national and religious sentiments. To conclude, it analyzed if religious pluralism is a realistic goal for Israel and what steps would be necessary to achieve this ideal. The final chapter presented the plan for the creation of a pluralistic third section at the Western Wall. It also offered various perspectives on this compromise including those of Women of the

Wall, Original-Women of the Wall, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the Masorti Movement for Conservative Judaism in Israel. Lastly, this chapter described the symbolic and political implications that the Western Wall compromise could have on Israeli society and world Jewry. A victory for Women of the Wall—the creation of a pluralistic prayer space—has the potential to influence the future of Israel’s political structure. The recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism would signify Israel’s acknowledgment that there is more than one way to be Jewish and could be the impetus for greater Jewish pluralism in Israel.

While the Women of the Wall controversy is a specific issue, it symbolizes the extensive problems arising from the unequal structure of religion and state in Israel. The manner in which Israel conducts the site that is significant to its liberation is indicative of the character of the state itself: one in which religion has subjugated democracy. Even more, the manner in which the government conducts the site that is important to *k’lal Yisrael* is indicative of who it considers to be a part of the Jewish people: only Ultra-Orthodox Jews or all Jewish denominations, only Israelis or world Jewry included? A victory for Women of the Wall—the creation of a pluralistic prayer space—has the potential to influence the future of Israel’s political structure. It has the power to weaken the ultra-Orthodox supremacy, strive for a religious equilibrium, and rebalance the power of religion and state. Through Women of the Wall’s influence on women’s participation in the public sphere, its use of media as a tool for social advocacy, and its social values of feminism and Jewish religious pluralism WOW is strengthening democracy in Israeli society.

Looking Ahead

As Women of the Wall eagerly wait to learn how the Knesset will rule next in regard to women's prayer at the Western Wall, one may question what else can be done to facilitate Jewish pluralism in Israel. Leaders of Liberal Judaism in Israel have provided three answers. The first is "to grow more than we are now,"³⁴⁰ whether through attracting secular Jews or through *aliyah*.³⁴¹ Director of the Masorti Movement in Israel, Yizhar Hess, explains that "there are a little more than half a million Israelis that identify themselves as Reform or Conservative/Masorti Jews in Israel. It's not significant enough, and we need to grow. When it happens, and we need to push it to happen, it will be politically profitable for the average, Israeli politician to make sure that he hears us."³⁴² Currently, the voice of non-Orthodox Judaism is still too small in Israel to stand alone in generating change. The second answer is to garner monetary support from American Jews to support non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Hess says, "This is the sole arena that can be changed dramatically, not with dozens of millions only with millions. It's a failure of us Israelis, for not advocating enough and not convincing enough and a failure of America Jewry for not allocating this bridge as the most important bridge for our two communities to be able to walk on in the next thirty-four years."³⁴³ Once this investment occurs, the third solution will be to build up these Jewish communities in Israel. Similar to Father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl's motto, "If you will it, it is no dream," Hess says "You will build. They will come." Currently, there are congregations "gathering in bomb

³⁴⁰ Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 7.

³⁴¹ *Aliyah* ("to go up" or "ascend" in Hebrew) is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel. This phrase is used to express that one is physically "going up" towards Jerusalem as well as spiritually being elevated as a result of living in the Holy Land. Written Interview with Levi Weiman-Kelman, September 16, 2016, p. 3.

³⁴² Transcript of Skype interview with Yizhar Hess, August 25, 2016, p. 7.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

shelters, in kindergartens, in different places that do not look, do not have the facility, and do not have the spirit of synagogue.”³⁴⁴ All of these proposed solutions—the growth of more liberal Jews, the monetary support of Reform and Conservative Judaism, and the building of these communities in Israel, rely on the partnership of Israel-Diaspora Jewry. The future of Liberal Judaism in Israel relies on this relationship.

WOW Chairwoman, Anat Hoffman, believes that, “Women of the Wall personifies one of the finest moments between Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews.” She explains, “our special connection is a microcosm of this relationship at its very best. I influenced you as you inspired me, as I influenced you, as you helped me, and hand-in-hand, we are moving the Jewish people forward.”³⁴⁵ Together, Women of the Wall and American Jewry challenge Israel to “open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew” instead of just to one type of Jew.³⁴⁶ WOW Director Lesley Sachs says, “I think we still have a long battle before us. I’m just hoping that North American Jewry won’t give up on us and get tired with the battle.”³⁴⁷

A victory for Women of the Wall would be a victory for Jewish women and for all of Liberal Judaism. Nevertheless, it would be one step forward on a much longer road towards the efflorescence of Jewish pluralism and democratic ideals in the state of Israel. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union of Reform Judaism in America, explains that right now, with the Haredi establishment “what we can change is the Kotel,” but

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Transcript of Skype interview with Anat Hoffman, September 8, 2016, p. 4.

³⁴⁶ National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities, *Israel: The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel*, May 14, 1948, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx> (accessed January 23, 2017).

³⁴⁷ Transcript of interview with Lesley Sachs, September 5, 2016, p. 7.

...we will then set our sights on the next and the next and the next, and when people say, 'Will you be satisfied if you can change the Kotel?' The answer is, 'Of course not!' We want equality throughout the society and it's high time for that to be the case. We in North America and all around the world—the majority of Jews—are not Haredi. The majority of Jews demand and deserve equality there.³⁴⁸

This equality is essential for a Jewish state that prides itself in being a homeland for the Jewish people and not just for the Israeli people.³⁴⁹ Concerning Women of the Wall's diaspora supporters, Israel's measure of Jewish pluralism is both what repels Liberal Jews from Israel and what currently keeps Liberal Jews in continued relationship, as they support the strengthening of a democratic state. With a more pluralistic society, Israel would live up to its values distinguished in the *Basic Law*: "To protect human dignity and liberty, in order to establish in a Basic Law the values of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."³⁵⁰ This actualization could lead to greater diaspora support. However, if diaspora Jews become fatigued from this struggle, Israel would have squandered a lifeline to its own progress. Women of the Wall is both a religious and a social movement that can have vital implications for the advancement of Israeli society.

³⁴⁸ Transcript of Skype interview with Rick Jacobs, July 27, 2016, p. 8.

³⁴⁹ "We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding..." See *The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel*.

³⁵⁰ Knesset, "Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty," March 17, 1992, https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3_eng.htm (accessed May 15, 2017).

AFTERWORD

Many join Women of the Wall for the pursuit of women's religious rights at the Western Wall. While the prayer group is making advancements for women's public prayer, it is also accomplishing goals that affect more than one gender. This thesis overcomes the idea that Women of the Wall is just for women's rights. To limit the struggle is to limit the scope of people that Women of the Wall's actions can affect. The prayer group does not just strive for Jewish women's rights but for religious pluralism: the acceptance that there exists more than one way to be Jewish.

As for the divide between Women of the Wall and Original-Women of the Wall, the actions of both prayer groups have the potential to legitimize Jewish pluralism in Israel. The former may obtain it through compromise while the latter may obtain it by staying true to the acquisition of rights in the women's section. Nevertheless, while both groups may gain more rights than they have now, both solutions would still mean a divided Western Wall. Instead, a more ideal solution would be the reestablishment of the Western Wall as a national, holy site instead of a religious, holy site. This resolution would eradicate power from one Jewish denomination and lead to a more democratic arrangement.

The first time I heard about Women of the Wall's struggle was the first day I perceived Israel in a negative light, and I was angry at the country I thought was supposed to be equally accepting of all types of Jews. Still, I strived to love Israel even with its flaws. Love is not easy. In any relationship, love comes with its challenges. Think of someone you care for who has disappointed you. You want her to be the best that she can be, and she may continue to upset you. However, your love is so great that you will do all that you can to help her become better, and you will even sing her praises

to others because you know of her potential. This is how I feel about Israel.

My heart hurts when I hear of the hatred and the injustice between Haredim and non-Orthodox Jews. My heart hurts when a woman cannot pray how she sees fit at the Western Wall, a public site. My heart hurts when there is so much hate against the Jewish people, but our *own* people cannot act as one. Our voice can make a difference. This is why our love matters. Our love needs to be stronger than the flaws that upset us.

Dear reader,

I pray that no matter which sentiment—whether you are full of love or anger for Israel—you will **act** upon your feelings in order for Israel to be an even greater home for the Jewish people.



IDF paratroopers Zion Karasanti, Yitzhak Yifat and Haim Oshri, stand together after the liberation of the Western Wall on June 7, 1967.

Credit: This iconic picture was taken by David Rubinger.



Women of the Wall recreate the famous picture of the paratroopers in 1967 with the original photographer.

Credit: David Rubinger, April 17, 2013.

Women of the Wall is a story about walls:

the walls between Jewish extremists and Jewish pluralists,
the walls between men and women,
and the walls between women's prayer and egalitarian prayer.

It is a story about the walls between Israel and America,

the walls between religion and state,
and the walls between Judaism and democracy.

Women of the Wall is a story about the countless walls between us,
physically and metaphorically.

However, that is not all it is about.

It is a story about brave women who are strong at heart, spirit, and faith,
persevering the struggle for women's rights—human rights—since 1988.

It is a story about empowerment and taking hold of one's own Jewish practice.

It is a story about sisterhood, brotherhood, and unity that embraces differences.

It is a story about leaders and supporters establishing mutual respect, collaboration, and
relationships, extending beyond boundaries, denominations, and countries.

It is a story about God and God's people learning to live together.

It is a prayer for a stronger, Jewish peoplehood.

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APPENDIX A - RESEARCH PROTOCOL FORM

Thesis Research Protocol

Preliminary Thesis Study Title: Women of the Wall: A Narrative History

Allison Cohen

Allison.cohen@huc.edu

Purpose of Study: The central purpose of this thesis will be to document the history of Women of the Wall (WOW) on the basis of primary source documents, including interviews. This thesis will not only reconstruct the history of WOW, but it will also provide readers with a critical analysis of how this organization has changed over time, analyzing the critical turning points and investigating the impetus for each step taken. In order to determine whether WOW is essentially a North American import and phenomenon, this thesis will also analyze (a) the denominational breakdown of WOW participation; (b) the breakdown of Israeli versus diaspora monetary support; and (c) Israeli perceptions of WOW. Women of the Wall's history sheds light on larger issues of Israeli society, which will be addressed in three chapters of this thesis. These social issues include: 1) Feminism and Women's Equality, 2) Israeli-American Relations, and 3) Church, State and Religious Pluralism. Lastly, this thesis will draw conclusions from primary source findings and offer prospects for WOW's future.

Principal Researcher's Professional Qualifications:

Allison Brooke Cohen

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Master of Arts in Hebrew Letters, May 2016

Rabbinic Ordination, expected May 2017

Brandeis University, Waltham, MA

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, May 2012

Faculty Thesis Advisor's Professional Qualifications:

Professor Gary P. Zola, Ph.D.

Edward M. Ackerman Family Distinguished Professor of the American Jewish

Experience and Reform Jewish History

Executive Director, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives;

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Cincinnati, Ohio

For more information, visit: <http://huc.edu/directory/gary-p-zola>

Previous related research:

To date, the only published work on the history of WOW is Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut's book, *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*. This book is a compilation of personal narratives provided by those who contributed in one way or another to WOW's early years.¹ Chesler and Haut assembled testimonies from rabbis, founding WOW participants, and early WOW supporters. Although the Chesler and Haut volume provides historians with valuable, primary source material, this work is not a critical history of WOW. Additionally, since the book was published in 2002, the importance of reconstructing the history of this organization over the last 15 years becomes all the more significant.

Subject characteristics & inclusion/exclusion criteria: The subjects are selected based on purposeful sampling to interview those individuals who can provide a viewpoint on Women of the Wall related to either a Jewish denomination or to holding Israeli or American nationality. I can assure that participants will not be coerced to participate in any way because they will willingly choose to participate and will be given the opportunity to stop participation in the interview at any time if they feel uncomfortable or do not wish to complete the interview for any reason.

Recruitment Procedures: In order to gain a variety of perspectives, I have chosen participants that identify with various, Jewish denominations. I have also chosen participants that have experience praying with, supporting, or working with/for Women of the Wall. Lastly, I have chosen participants who live in Israel or America to help me learn about Israeli-American Relations as well as the differences in Church-State relations.

Procedure:

Participants can choose to either write in their answers to their interview questions or have an interview with me. The interview may take place in person, on the phone or over a visual, communication program, such as Skype.

Each participant will be given a consent form that they must sign before discussion or data collection begins.

For record keeping, the interviews will be recorded by a Digital Tape Recorder either from the audio in person, off of the Skype, or from loudspeaker of the phone. All participants will be aware of the presence of the recorder. Interviews will be transcribed from these recordings.

Should a participant experience any emotional stress due to the content of the interview questions asked, I will stop discussion and remind the participant that s/he is free to end the interview at any time. I will then ask a different question so as to move the discussion in a new direction.

¹ Chesler, Phyllis and Rivka Haut. *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2003.

Principal Researcher: Allison Brooke Cohen

Anticipated Benefits for subjects: It is hoped that the results of this study will benefit the interviewee by providing greater introspection and insight into his or her experiences. The interviewee will also benefit from knowing that he or she is advancing the historical enterprise and, also, contributing to the education of others on this important matter. The written and recorded stories and answers the interviewee provides will enable future generations to learn more about the history of WOW.

Compensation to subjects: Participating respondents in this study will not be financially compensated.

Plans for obtaining and documenting informed consent: Please see attached consent form.

All participants show their initial consent to participate in the study by completing a written consent form that the researcher will provide either by email or by US Mail. Prior to the interview, participants must sign this written consent form and scan, mail or fax this form back to the researcher.

Email: Allison.cohen@huc.edu

Mail: The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives
3101 Clifton Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45220

Fax: 513-221-7812

Participants will have the right to either release or disclose any names or other identifying information revealed during the interview.

Plans for data storage:

With permission, all written answers, recordings, or recording-transcripts may become part of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives located on Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion’s Cincinnati campus. In addition, a copy of the final thesis will be stored at the Klau Library located on the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion’s Cincinnati campus.

פרוטוקול מחקר תזה
כותרת תזה ראשונית: נשות הכותל: היסטורית הנרטיב
אליסון כהן
Allison.cohen@huc.edu

המטרה המרכזית של התזה היא לתעד את ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל על בסיס מסמכים מקוריים, הכוללים ראיונות בע"פ. תזה זו לא רק משחזרת את ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל, אלא גם מספקת לקוראים עם חשיבה ביקורתית לגבי האופן בו השתנה הארגון לאורך הזמן, ניתוח של נקודות המפנה המשמעותיות וחקירת הסיבות לכל צעד שנעשה. על-מנת לקבוע האם ארגון נשות הכותל הוא למעשה ייבוא צפון אמריקאי ותופעה, תזה זו תנתח גם את הדברים הבאים: (א) ההתפלגות הדתית של נשות הכותל; (ב) התפלגות התמיכה הכלכלית בין זו של הגולה לזו הישראלית; (ג) התפיסות הישראליות על נשות הכותל. ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל שופכת אור על בעיות גדולות יותר של החברה הישראלית, אשר יוצגו בשלושה פרקים בעבודת התזה. סוגיות חברתיות אלה כוללות: (1) פמיניזם ושוויון נשים, (2) יחסי ישראל-ארה"ב, (3) המדינה ופלורליזם דתי. לבסוף, תזה זו תציג מסקנות מהממצאים המקוריים ותציע תחזיות לעתיד של נשות הכותל.

הכשרה מקצועית של החוקרת הראשית:

אליסון ברוק כהן
Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות
תואר שני, מאי 2016
סמיכה (רבנות), הצפויה להתקבל ב- 2017

אוניברסיטת ברנדייס, וולטהאם, מסצ'וסטס
תואר ראשון בסוציולוגיה, מאי 2012

הכשרה מקצועית של יועץ התזה:

ד"ר גארי פ זולא.
פרופסור מכובד מטעם אדוארד מ. אקרמן של החוויה האמריקאית-יהודית והיסטוריה יהודית-רפורמית.
מנכ"ל, מרכז יעקב ריידר מרקוס של הארכיון היהודי-אמריקאי;
Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות
סינסינטי, אוהיו

לקבלת מידע נוסף, בקר באתר: <http://huc.edu/directory/gary-p-zola>

המחקר הקודם בנושא:

נכון להיום, העבודה היחידה שפורסמה בנושא ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל מופיעה בספר של פיליס צ'סלר ורבקה האוט, **נשות הכותל: טוענים לאדמה קדושה באתר הקדוש של היהדות**. ספר זה הוא אוסף של סיפורים אישיים שסופקו על-ידי אלה שתרמו בדרך זו או אחרת לנשות הכותל בשנים המוקדמות. צ'סלר והאוט אספו עדויות מרבנים, מייסדים ותומכים קודמים של נשות הכותל. למרות שהווליום של צ'סלר והאוט מעניק להיסטוריונים חומר מקורי, ראשוני ובעל ערך, עבודה זו היא לא היסטוריה ביקורתית של נשות הכותל. בנוסף, מאז שהספר יצא לאור בשנת 2002, החשיבות של שחזור ההיסטוריה של הארגון בחמש עשרה השנים האחרונות הופכת הכל למשמעותי יותר.

מאפייני המשתתפים וקריטריוני הכללה/הדחה: המשתתפים נבחרו על סמך דגימה תכליתית מתוך מטרה לראיין את אלה אשר יכולים לספק נקודת מבט על נשות הכותל הקשורה לזרם דתי יהודי או להחזקת אזרחות ישראלית או אמריקאית. אני יכולה להבטיח כי המשתתפים לא יוכרחו להשתתף בראיון בכל דרך שהיא, אלא יבחרו להשתתף מתוך רצון. כמו-כן תינתן להם האופציה להפסיק את השתתפותם בכל עת במידה שירגישו לא בנוח או שלא יחפצו לסיים את הראיון מכל סיבה שהיא.

נהלי גיוס:

במטרה להשיג מגוון פרספקטיבות, בחרתי משתתפים אשר מזוהים עם זרמים יהודיים שונים. בחרתי גם משתתפים שיש להם ניסיון בתפילה, תמיכה או עבודה עם/עבור נשות הכותל. לבסוף, בחרתי משתתפים שחיים בישראל או בארה"ב מתוך מטרה לעזור לי ללמוד על יחסי ישראל-ארה"ב, כמו גם על ההבדלים ביחסי דת ומדינה.

נהלים:

המשתתפים יכולים לבחור לכתוב את תשובותיהם בריאיון עצמו או לערוך ריאיון איתי. הריאיון יכול להתבצע באופן אישי, בטלפון או בתכנית ויזואלית-תקשורתית, כמו סקייפ. לכל משתתף יינתן טופס הסכמה אשר הוא חייב לחתום עליו לפני תחילת השיחה או איסוף המידע. בשביל שמירת הרישומים, הראיונות יוקלטו על-ידי טייפ מקליט דיגיטלי או בזמן ריאיון איתי, או מהסקייפ, או מהרמקול של הטלפון. כל המשתתפים יהיו מדעים לנוכחות המקליט. הראיונות יתומללו מהקלטות אלה. אם המשתתף יחוש כל תחושת מתח נפשי בשל תוכן השאלות, אני אפסיק את השיחה ואזכיר לו שהוא רשאי להפסיק את הראיון בכל עת. במצב כזה, אשאל שאלות אחרות כדי לנתב את הראיון לכיוון חדש.

הטבות אשר צפויות למשתתפים: יש לקוות כי תוצאות המחקר יועילו למרואייין במתן התבוננות פנימית גדולה יותר ותובנות על חוויות שלו. המרואייין גם יהנה מההידעה שהוא תורם להתקדמות המפעל ההיסטורי, ולחינוכם של האחרים בנושא חשוב זה. הסיפורים והתשובות הכתובים והמוקלטים שהעניקו המרואיינים יאפשרו לדורות העתיד ללמוד עוד על ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל.

פיצוי למשתתפים: המרואיינים במחקר זה לא יפוצו כלכלית.

תוכניות לקבלה ותיעוד של ההסכמה: בבקשה, ראה את טופס ההסכמה המצורף. כל המשתתפים יביעו את הסכמתם הראשונית להשתתף במחקר ע"י מילוי טופס ההסכמה בכתב שהחוקר יעניק להם בדוא"ל או בדואר הרגיל. לפני הראיון, משתתפים חייבים לחתום על טופס ההסכמה בכתב ולשלוח אותו בחזרה לחוקר באמצעות סריקה, דרך הדואר או דרך הפקס.

דוא"ל: Allison.cohen@huc.edu
דואר: The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives
Clifton Avenue 3101
Cincinnati, OH, USA 45220

פקס: 513-221-7812

למשתתפים תהיה הזכות לשחרר או לחשוף כל שם או מידע מזהה אחר העולה במהלך הראיון.

תוכניות לאחסון נתונים:

עם מתן רשות, כל התשובות בכתב, ההקלטות, או תמלילי-ההקלטות עשויים להיות חלק מ"מרכז יעקב ריידר מרקוס של הארכיון היהודי-אמריקאי" הממוקם ב Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות בקמפוס סינסינטי. בנוסף, עותק של התזה הסופית יישמר בספריית "קלאו" (Klau Library) הממוקמת ב Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות בקמפוס סינסינטי, אוהיו, ארה"ב.

APPENDIX B - RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Preliminary Thesis Study Title: Women of the Wall: A Narrative History

Allison Cohen

Allison.cohen@huc.edu

Project Description:

I am conducting primary research on Women of the Wall.

As gaining a variety of perspectives is necessary for understanding the spectrum of viewpoints that exist, I would like to interview you in order to learn from your experiences and to obtain a range of viewpoints and opinions about Women of the Wall. You may ask any questions regarding the research, and they will be answered fully. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation is voluntary.

Goals:

The central purpose of this thesis will be to document the history of Women of the Wall (WOW) on the basis of primary source documents, including oral interviews. This thesis will not only reconstruct the history of WOW, but it will also provide readers with a critical analysis of how this organization has changed over time, analyzing the critical turning points and investigating the impetus for each step taken. In order to determine whether WOW is essentially a North American import and phenomenon, this thesis will also analyze (a) the denominational breakdown of WOW participation; (b) the breakdown of Israeli versus diaspora monetary support; and (c) Israeli perceptions of WOW. Women of the Wall's history sheds light on larger issues of Israeli society, which will be addressed in three chapters of this thesis. These social issues include: 1) Feminism and Women's Equality, 2) Israeli-American Relations, and 3) Church, State and Religious Pluralism. Lastly, this thesis will draw conclusions from primary source findings and offer prospects for WOW's future.

Procedure:

A. If your interview answers are typed, I ask for permission to quote or summarize your answers in my written work. Please feel free to write as much or as little as you want. You can also decide not to answer any question or to stop answering the interview any time you want. The written answers will become the property of the project.

B. If your interview is in person or via audio or video call, I would like your permission to record the interview. I am also planning to transcribe these recordings so that they can be used effectively. The interview will be recorded only if you provide your written consent. Please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can also decide not to answer any question or to stop the interview any time you want. The tapes and transcripts will become the property of the project.

C. If you so choose, the recordings and recording-transcripts (or copy of notes taken) will be kept anonymous, without any reference to your identity, and your identity will be concealed in any reports written from the interviews, unless you give permission to make known personal information.

D. If you so choose, the recordings and recording-transcripts (or copy of notes taken) will

become part of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, located on the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion’s Cincinnati campus.

Compensation: Participating respondents in this study will not be financially compensated.

Confidentiality:

Participants can complete the interview upon signing the following consent form.

No publications or reports from this project will include identifying information on any participant without your signed permission. If you agree to join this study, please sign your name on the following page.

CONSENT FORM

Preliminary Thesis Study Title: Women of the Wall: A Narrative History

I, _____, agree to be interviewed for the project entitled ***TBD*** which is being produced by Allison Cohen of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH.

I certify that I have been told of the confidentiality of information collected for this project; that I have been given satisfactory answers to my inquiries concerning project procedures and other matters; and that I have been advised that I am free to discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without prejudice.

I agree to participate in one or more interviews for this project. I understand that the results of this study may be published in an academic journal or book.

I agree that any information obtained from this research may be used in any way thought best for this study.

I agree that my identity can be revealed in relationship to my experiences and answers.

I agree that my written answers, recordings, or recording-transcripts can become part of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives located on the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion's Cincinnati campus.

Signature of Interviewee

Date _____

Signature of Interviewer

Date: _____

If you have questions: The researchers conducting this study are Allison Cohen under guidance of Professor Gary P. Zola, Ph.D. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact A. Cohen at allison.cohen@huc.edu or Professor Zola at GZola@huc.edu

טופס הסכמה למחקר תזה
כותרת התזה הראשונית: נשות הכותל: היסטורית הנרטיב
אליסון כהן
Allison.cohen@huc.edu

תיאור פרויקט:

אני עורכת מחקר ראשוני על נשות הכותל. במטרה לקבל מגוון פרספקטיבות הכרחיות להבנת הספקטרום של נקודות המבט הקיימות, אשמח לראיין אותך כדי ללמוד חוויות שלך וכדי להשיג מגוון השקפות ודעות על נשות הכותל. אם יש לך שאלות בנוגע למחקר, אתה מוזמן לשאול כל שאלה ותקבל מענה על כולן. אתה יכול לפרוש מהמחקר בכל עת. השתתפותך היא על בסיס התנדבותי.

מטרות:

המטרה המרכזית של התזה היא לתעד את ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל על בסיס מסמכים מקוריים, הכוללים ראיונות בע"פ. תזה זו לא רק משחזרת את ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל, אלא גם מספקת לקוראים עם חשיבה ביקורתית לגבי האופן בו השתנה הארגון לאורך הזמן, ניתוח של נקודות המפנה המשמעותיות וחקירת הסיבות לכל צעד שנעשה. על-מנת לקבוע האם ארגון נשות הכותל הוא למעשה ייבוא צפון אמריקאי ותופעה (בפני עצמה), תזה זו תנתח גם את הדברים הבאים: (א) ההתפלגות הדתית של נשות הכותל; (ב) התפלגות התמיכה הכלכלית בין זו של הגולה לזו הישראלית; (ג) התפיסות הישראליות על נשות הכותל. ההיסטוריה של נשות הכותל שופכת אור על בעיות גדולות יותר של החברה הישראלית, אשר יוצגו בשלושה פרקים בעבודת התזה. סוגיות חברתיות אלה כוללות: (1) פמיניזם ושוויון נשים, (2) יחסי ישראל-ארה"ב, (3) המדינה ופלורליזם דתי. לבסוף, תזה זו תציג מסקנות מהממצאים המקוריים ותציע תחזיות לעתיד של נשות הכותל.

נהלים:

1. אם תשובות הראיון שלך מוקלדות, אבקש רשות לצטט או לסכם את תשובותיך בעבודתי. בבקשה, תרגיש חופשי לכתוב כמה שתרצה, בין אם זה מעט או הרבה. אתה יכול גם להחליט שלא לענות על אף שאלה או להפסיק לענות על הראיון בכל עת שתרצה. התשובות הכתובות יהיו לקניינו של הפרויקט.
2. אם הראיון שלך הוא אישי או באמצעות שמע או שיחת וידאו, אבקש את רשותך להקליט את הראיון. אני גם מתכוונת לתמלל את ההקלטות הללו, כך שיוכלו לשמש אותי ביעילות. הראיון יוקלט רק אם תעביר את הסכמתך לכך בכתב. בבקשה, תרגיש חופשי לומר מעט או הרבה - כמה שאתה רוצה. אתה יכול גם להחליט שלא לענות על אף שאלה או להפסיק את הראיון בכל עת שתרצה. ההקלטות והתמלילים יהיו לקניינו של הפרויקט.
3. אם תבחר לעשות כן, ההקלטות ותמלילי ההקלטות (או עותק של ההערות שנלקחו) יישמרו באנונימיות, מבלי להתייחס לזהותך וזהותך תישאר חסויה בכל דוח כתוב מהראיונות, אלא אם תתן רשות להביא לידיע מידע אישי.
4. אם תבחר לעשות כן, ההקלטות ותמלילי ההקלטות (או עותק של ההערות שנלקחו) יהפכו לחלק מ"מרכז יעקב ריידר מרקוס של הארכיון היהודי האמריקאי", הממוקם על Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות בקמפוס סינסינטי.

פיצויים: המשתתפים במחקר זה לא יפוצו כלכלית.

סודיות:

המשתתפים יכולים להשלים את הראיון עם חתימת טופס ההסכמה שלהלן. אף פרסום או דוח מפרויקט זה לא יכלול פרטים מזהים על המשתתף, מבלי אישור חתום של המשתתף. אם אתה מסכים להצטרף למחקר זה, בבקשה חתום את שמך בעמוד הבא.

טופס הסכמה

כותרת התזה הראשונית: נשות הכותל: היסטורית הנרטיב

אני, _____, מסכים להתראיין לפרויקט המכונה TBD המנוהל על-ידי אליסון כהן מ- Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות, סינסינטי, אוהיו, ארה"ב.

אני מאשר כי נאמר לי בנוגע לסודיות המידע שנאסף עבור פרויקט זה; שניתנו לי תשובות מספקות לשאלותיי בדבר נהלי הפרויקט ועניינים נוספים; ושהובהר לי שאני רשאי להפסיק את ההשתתפות בפרויקט או בפעילות בכל עת וללא משוא פנים.

אני מסכים להשתתף בראיון אחד או יותר עבור פרויקט זה. אני מבין כי תוצאות מחקר זה עשויות להתפרסם בכתב עת או ספר אקדמי.

אני מסכים שכל מידע שהתקבל ממחקר זה עשוי לשמש בכל מחשבה או רעיון אשר ישרתו את המחקר בצורה הטובה ביותר.

אני מסכים שהזהות שלי יכולה להיחשף בקשר לחוויות ולתשובות שלי.

אני מסכים שתשובותיי בכתב, ההקלטות, או תמלילי ההקלטות יכולות להיות חלק מ"מרכז יעקב ריידר מרקוס של הארכיון היהודי-אמריקאי", הממוקם ב- Hebrew Union College – מכון למדעי היהדות בקמפוס סינסינטי, אוהיו, ארה"ב.

_____ תאריך: _____
חתימה של המרואיין

_____ תאריך: _____
חתימה של המרואיין

אם יש לך שאלות: החוקרים העורכים מחקר זה הם אליסון כהן תחת הדרכתו של ד"ר גארי פ. זולא. אנא שאל כל שאלה שיש לך עכשיו. אם יש לך שאלות בהמשך, ניתן לפנות לאליסון כהן בכתובת האלקטרונית: allison.cohen@huc.edu או לפרופסור זולא בכתובת: GZola@huc.edu.

APPENDIX C – RECOGNITIONS

Comprehensive Chronology

December 1st, 1988:

The individuals present at the women-only prayer service included:

May 10th, 2013: Rosh Chodesh Sivan Prayer, Protest, and Police Protection

I was the leader of this Rosh Chodesh service. At that time, I was an intern for Women of the Wall.

October 12th, 2014: Bat Mitzvah Campaign:

The young women who took part in the campaign include: Ashira Abramowitz-Silverman, daughter of Yosef Abramowitz and Rabbi Susan Silverman, Devora Leff, daughter of Lauri Donahue and Rabbi Barry Leff, Sasha Lutt, daughter of Irina Lutt and Alma Weiss-Abraham daughter of Sharon Abraham-Weiss and Yoav Weiss.

October 24th, 2014 - First Bat Mitzvah with Torah Scroll at the Western Wall:

On that day, Sasha Lutt from Beer Sheva, daughter of Irina Lutt, became a *bat mitzvah*.

November 2nd, 2016 [Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan]: Torah Scrolls in the Women's Section:

Israeli leaders included: Anat Hoffman (WOW Chairperson), Lesley Sachs (WOW Director), Rabbi Noa Sattath (Director of Israeli Religious Action Center), Gilad Kariv (Director of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism), Yizhar Hess (Director of Masorti Movement), Rabbi Ada Avidov (Kehillat Har-El),

Cantor Evan Cohen (Kehillat Har-El).

American leaders included: Rabbi Rick Jacobs (President of the URJ) and Rabbi Steven Wernick (Chief Executive Officer of The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism).